

## Trinity VIII

### Collect of the Day

Grant to us, Lord, the Spirit to think and do always such things as are right, that we, who cannot do anything that is good without You, may be enabled by you to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*The prayer confronts our culture head on. We imagine that we are in control and capable. We are autonomous deciders of the important questions of our lives and insist that we are “free.” This prayer assumes quite the opposite. We cannot do anything that is good without God. We pray that he would grant us the Spirit so that we may think and do right things. We need God to be active in our lives in order for us to live according to his will.*

*The average American simply won't be living in that world. This presents a challenge and an opportunity for the preacher. Our readings and this prayer are making a basic assumption for the hearer. The preacher's job will be to put the hearer into a place where he/she can pray this prayer and hear these words. We will need to recast the underlying narrative of life. We are not the autonomous and capable decision makers we imagine ourselves to be. We are dependent beings who are subject to forces beyond our control and perhaps even beyond our perceptions. The more evident these forces are, the easier this will be for us to proclaim. But be aware, the preacher who goes down this path should expect some resistance. People do not want to hear about this. They don't like it. They cherish this idolatry that they are in control of their own lives. They love it. They won't like the man who challenges that idea. Jeremiah will embody that for us today, but Jesus also will have hard words about houses built on the sand. The Pharisees and religious types of his day were not pleased.*

### Readings

Jeremiah 23:16-29 (*This reading is also found in the three year lectionary in series C, proper 15*)

<sup>16</sup> Thus says the LORD of hosts: “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. <sup>17</sup> They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’”

<sup>18</sup> For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD  
to see and to hear his word,  
or who has paid attention to his word and listened?

<sup>19</sup> Behold, the storm of the LORD!  
Wrath has gone forth,  
a whirling tempest;  
it will burst upon the head of the wicked.

<sup>20</sup> The anger of the LORD will not turn back  
until he has executed and accomplished  
the intents of his heart.

In the latter days you will understand it clearly.

<sup>21</sup> “I did not send the prophets,  
yet they ran;

I did not speak to them,  
yet they prophesied.

<sup>22</sup> But if they had stood in my council,  
then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,  
and they would have turned them from their evil way,  
and from the evil of their deeds.

<sup>23</sup> “Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? <sup>24</sup> Can a man hide himself in  
secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth?

declares the LORD. <sup>25</sup> I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name,  
saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ <sup>26</sup> How long shall there be lies in the heart of the

prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, <sup>27</sup> who think to  
make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers  
forgot my name for Baal? <sup>28</sup> Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has  
my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the LORD.

<sup>29</sup> Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?

<sup>30</sup> *Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who steal my words from one  
another. <sup>31</sup> Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who use their tongues and  
declare, ‘declares the LORD.’ <sup>32</sup> Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares  
the LORD, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when  
I did not send them or charge them. So they do not profit this people at all, declares the LORD.*

*The book of Jeremiah is sadly neglected. It is not because Jeremiah does not have important things to say, but it is because they are sometimes difficult to access. Jeremiah’s book appears to us to have been put through a sort of blender. The chapters are all jumbled up, or at least they are not in any order which makes sense to those who read it. There might be a pattern here and we are just too spiritually dense to perceive it. It may be that work was reassembled after the king destroyed the copy of it as Jeremiah himself records. It may be that this book is actually a compilation made by his secretary Baruch, or it may simply be that this is the result of a long and difficult transmission process. In any event, the challenges of reading Jeremiah have meant that this longest book of prophecy in the OT is often not read.*

*The other element which has contributed to the neglect of this book is the subject matter itself. Jeremiah had a miserable job to do. He was the deliverer of really bad news. The people had so compromised the faithful, covenantal relationship with God that God was keeping the promises,*

*all of them, even the ones about ripping the people from the land and sending them into exile. The city of Jerusalem, the Temple, the Holy Place would all fall. The Babylonians would be the instrument of God's cleansing act. This would involve rape, slavery, refugees, death, and mayhem. No one wanted to hear this and no one does today. But this was the message which Jeremiah had to preach. He was not popular in his day either.*

*It was not all gloom and doom. After the destruction came the rebuilding, the replanting, the new vineyard of the Lord, but it could not come unless the destruction came too. Jeremiah himself was uniquely equipped for this. As a direct descendant of Eli he was living under a terrible curse his whole life. You can read this in chapters 2 and 3 of I Samuel. Pay particular attention to the curse which God lays on the house of Eli. Eli was of one of the two lines which descended from Aaron. His people worked mostly in the North. They always backed the wrong candidate for king and were consistently struck down. Finally, after they crossed Solomon once too often he banished the lot of them to Anathoth, a little village outside the city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah is a priest from Anathoth (Jeremiah 1). He lives under the curse which is laid on the house of Eli, and part of his curse is to be the bearer of this terrible message and bear the consequences of being the proclaimer of such an unpopular message. God will destroy his holy city, his holy house, his holy place, because the sins of the people have defiled it.*

*Of course, Jeremiah in his cursed status is also a picture of Christ, who hung cursed upon a tree for us. It is in a sense Jeremiah's redemption found within the very punishment laid upon Eli. It is mysterious and if you think about it too much your head can spin a little.*

*This text reflects the fact that the folks of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's time don't like having their sins exposed any more than people do today. They went running after the prophets of peace and prosperity and ignored the message which Jeremiah spoke, or they reacted to it, cruelly treating him when he was simply doing his job as a prophet.*

*Here God assures Jeremiah that it is His word and that will stand and it reminds all of us that God is not a buddy. He is the almighty and terrible creator, fearsome in his holiness. The beginning of wisdom is still fear. Some time ago a blog on First Things addressed this. Here it is if you are interested: <http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2013/07/no-squishy-love>*

*Today things are not much different, are they? The churches of wealth and prosperity have parking lots that are full. Those who faithfully proclaim the Word of the Lord are often asleep because even those who attend are not really interested in hearing the rock crushing word which God has for us. American laws and culture have reduced the Church to a sort of popularity contest which struggles to compete with the spectacles of NFL and PGA, and now must face the competition from those who cloak themselves in religion, but preach a message of greed and acquiescence to our fallen human nature. We also saw many who held the idea that they were self-competent in matters spiritual. They could piece together their own spirituality from pieces of different religions that appeal to them. Behind such an idea is that I am able to do this. Are we? Is that a truth?*

*But we cannot always blame those outside the Church. Often the preachers are afraid to speak the full Word of God. After all, a paycheck and a pension plan are all paid for by those folks whom we preach. In this regard, I really think the lay diaconate has an advantage over the full*

*time clergy. When your paycheck is guaranteed by the folks to whom you preach, it can be very easy to tell them what they want to hear. I am not saying that such a lack of integrity is wide spread or even seen, but it does not take much imagination to see why it might just be easier to avoid certain hot topics that will likely tick off some of the folks, especially the folks with the deep pockets and the influence.*

*Yet God's Word is clear and it has power. God wants to destroy his people, but that is not the last Word and it would be a mistake to claim that it is the last word. God destroys so he may build. Just as the wrecking ball brings the building down so that a new structure can be built in its place, the word of God smashes our pride and our conceit so that a new person may be built on the solid work of Christ and live in His kingdom, on and in His Word*

*We wondered where one might find some Gospel in this text. It seemed like very heavy law. This is hard. One might find the Gospel in the very fact that God is still talking. He is concerned that his message gets out and that others are distorting his truth. That truth about which he is concerned is the truth of the Gospel, the truth of His love. But that is a tough connection to make here. It is couched very lawfully.*

*Even the phrase, "Am I not a God who is far away." while it can be a statement of God's presence which could be good, here God asks if you really think you can hide from him.*

*We thought that God was actually pretty gracious to let the dreamers tell their dreams. He just asks that they don't attribute this to him. His Word is fire and a hammer. The rock is broken, yes, but broken so that it may be used to rebuild something. Perhaps that is the place we will find the Gospel – but more likely we will go to the other readings. Any one up for preaching the psalm this week?*

**Sermon Idea** The Hammer that Breaks the Rock into Pieces (That the hearer would perceive the God's love for him/her even in the crushing moments of life, and certainly as they reflect upon them.)

This sermon has three possible avenues presented in the two readings for approaching this. Jeremiah really is attacking the idolatry of autonomy, the idea that we get to choose which voice we listen to. Americans have drunk deeply of this well and the idea that if I don't like this congregation I can just go find another seems to be woven into our very fabric. But with that has come also the idea that I can choose to listen to another God, or, worse, I can find the same God speaking in a multitude of different and even conflicting voices. The result is that it feeds our human desire to "be like gods" which has afflicted us since a scene in a garden long ago.

Jesus then takes two other tracks. The first is family. We have at times almost enshrined family to extent that it is the expression of our religion. It is still the excuse which trumps all others. A frequent reason cited for folks who leave government service is to spend more time with family. Even Steve Carroll's departure from *The Office* was occasioned by his decision to spend more time with his family. All of this is good, and families are good, but they are not the Good. Family can be an idol and Jesus tells us that he will split families apart, causing divisions within them. His kingdom is more important than family.

Then he hits a theme which is particularly resonant with our generation. He notes that our knowledge has not brought us wisdom. Knowledge is good, but like family it is not the Good. We can interpret the signs of the weather, sort of, but we cannot interpret the signs of the times. Jesus is pointing out that for all our intelligence and knowledge, there are many things we are just stupid about. We need him. But we often believe that the way to solve a problem is to devote more money to research, to have bright people thinking about it. But what we often fail to realize is that the problems solved are simply symptoms of the root cause of our woes, and that is sin. That will take a God solution.

All three of these are examples of God's Word doing its hammer job on us, breaking the stubborn heart. The preacher could use all three or develop one of them very effectively. But it is important that the preacher also realize that the goal of the hammer is not only to destroy, but it is a tool we use to build the house too. God destroys our self-vaunting pride so he can replace it with the humble faith which will be lifted far higher than we could even imagine. He crushes our rebellious nature so he can revive us as more than we ever thought or deserved, the very sons of God.

I used to work for an antique store, the carpenter in there would often pull apart a piece of furniture to fix it. He could not force a little glue into the loose joint, he had to tear it apart to restore it. (Jesus said that he had not come to sew a new patch on an old garment or put new wine in an old wineskin.) Jesus becomes the glue that restores the relationship, but to do that he must assert his lordship over the whole thing. My relationships are not really mine, they are his too. He becomes the governor of them, he gets to determine how I live in them. He defines them with his forgiveness, love, honesty, and standards.

Thus the proudly self-determining spirit whom Jeremiah crushed becomes the very citizen of heaven, able to choose right from wrong naturally and effortlessly when we are in heaven. We won't need to work at that anymore. The family which has taken its rightful second place in the Christian schema of life becomes this tremendous blessing from God, a treasure for our good. Knowledge and the ability to know, when they are dosed with a measure of the humility which they need, becomes a great tool by which life can be made better and diseases can be cured. It won't cure the problems of death and sin but it can help us alleviate the pain and treat the symptoms of our sinful condition.

Psalm 26

<sup>1</sup> Vindicate me, O LORD,  
for I have walked in my integrity,  
and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.

<sup>2</sup> Prove me, O LORD, and try me;  
test my heart and my mind.

<sup>3</sup> For your steadfast love is before my eyes,  
and I walk in your faithfulness.

<sup>4</sup> I do not sit with men of falsehood,  
nor do I consort with hypocrites.

<sup>5</sup> I hate the assembly of evildoers,  
and I will not sit with the wicked.

<sup>6</sup> I wash my hands in innocence  
and go around your altar, O LORD,  
<sup>7</sup> proclaiming thanksgiving aloud,  
and telling all your wondrous deeds.

<sup>8</sup> O LORD, I love the habitation of your house  
and the place where your glory dwells.

<sup>9</sup> Do not sweep my soul away with sinners,  
nor my life with bloodthirsty men,

<sup>10</sup> in whose hands are evil devices,  
and whose right hands are full of bribes.

<sup>11</sup> But as for me, I shall walk in my integrity;  
redeem me, and be gracious to me.

<sup>12</sup> My foot stands on level ground;  
in the great assembly I will bless the LORD.

Acts 20:27-38 (*This reading also occurs in the Easter season in Series C, falling on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – which is celebrated as Good Shepherd Sunday – hence the shepherding imagery you find in my commentary below.*)

<sup>17</sup> Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. <sup>18</sup> And when they came to him, he said to them:

*“You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, <sup>19</sup> serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; <sup>20</sup> how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, <sup>21</sup> testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>22</sup> And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, <sup>23</sup> except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. <sup>24</sup> But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. <sup>25</sup> And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. <sup>26</sup> Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, <sup>27</sup> for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. <sup>28</sup> Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> I know that after my*

departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;<sup>30</sup> and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

<sup>31</sup> Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. <sup>32</sup> And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. <sup>33</sup> I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. <sup>34</sup> You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. <sup>35</sup> In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

<sup>36</sup> And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. <sup>37</sup> And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, <sup>38</sup> being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

*Luke has been asserting the presence of Christ in the Christian community, in the people who love, serve, preach, teach, and more. They have given the lame to walk, opened the eyes of the blind, cast out demons, and raised the dead. In fact, in the very verses which precede this account of Paul's farewell to the elders of Ephesus, he raises the young man who falls from the window. In doing that he looks a great deal like Jesus himself. Of course it is not all healing and the like. When the first Christians die, it is with the words of Jesus on their lips. When they are persecuted, Jesus says it is him who is persecuted.*

*Now, Paul preaches a farewell sermon to the folks in Ephesus. This is excellent shepherding, but it is not really Paul tending the flock, but it is really Christ through him. Of course, Paul speaks these words, and yes, any preacher can err, but through preachers and pastors, Christ continues to shepherd his flock.*

*Consider what Paul tells them. He has suffered with them, lived with them. He has given them the words they needed to hear. Now, constrained by the Spirit, obedient to the Over-shepherd, he is heading to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen. You can almost hear his heart breaking for these people he is leaving. You can almost hear his heart breaking at the thought of being apart from them. He loves them. Ephesus is the city in which he has spent more time as a preacher than any other single city, at least as far as we know.*

*He knows, perhaps by the prompting of the Spirit, perhaps simply because he can see the forces that are lining up against him, but he knows that he will not get to see them again. And he cannot resist the last opportunity to teach, admonish and remind them. He is the shepherd to the end. This is not just a farewell party for Paul, it is his last chance to teach them something and he will not be denied. He will lead this flock to the green pastures of God's Word and the still waters of His love.*

*Paul speaks of the integrity of his ministry, knowing that his own word is the effective tool of God. If his character has been impugned, he cannot really teach. I think this has volumes to*

*Speak to us today as Catholicism continues its long penitential season in light of the clerical abuse scandals that are besetting it. What is really at stake in much of this is the authoritative and pastoral voice of Roman Catholicism. Before we get too denominationally sanctimonious about this, we have to realize that the only reason the media is not focused on the many abuses in Lutheran institutions, is that we don't have the money to be sued, and for the most part we have already sacrificed our moral authority to an ill-conceived desire to "fit" into the current culture. We have largely already lost it, especially when we take Lutheranism as a whole. Catholicism is in the sights of the media today because it has taken principled stands on moral issues.*

*What this means is that we are largely without a moral authority in the lives of people, and if we preach from that perspective, we will only come off sounding shrill and anything but prophetic. We will be risible. Rather, I think we need to return to what Paul says at the beginning of this text. He served, he wept with them, and he loved them. It is only in that relationship that we have any authority to be heard or heeded.*

*But thus has Christ lived among us. He has not shirked the duty or the dirty, but has been numbered among us transgressors, cared for the little, least, and lost. He has walked our dusty roads; he has come to our wedding feasts, fished with us, and grieved at gravesides with us. Finally he has died with us.*

*Now the risen Christ speaks.*

*We wondered if this would not lead some of our people to wonder if we were leaving like Paul. But really, the sermon based on this text should point to the ministry which is happening right now as the ministry of Christ.*

**Sermon Idea:** I believe in one, holy Christian Church (that the Holy Spirit would comfort the hearer with the presence and aid of Christ)

The law of this sermon will be the beleaguered sense of many congregations and congregants. It seems that God has forgotten about the Church in North America sometimes. It feels like we are doing this all by ourselves and that we don't seem to be winning. The demographics speak a cruel reality for us.

To this Paul speaks several good things.

1. Paul says that Christ has won this church with his own blood. That means it is not mine, yours, or anyone's other than Christ's Church. He owns it, he cares for it, and he is the one who has the solutions to its problems and the answers to its question. It is his church.
2. Paul has been declaring the whole counsel of God, admonishing them with tears, he has toiled among them, and done so much. Christ has worked through Paul and worked hard. He is still doing that sort of work today.
3. Paul is going away. It is not Paul's church to care for. Pastors die, leave, and people do too. But Jesus stays. He commends them to the care of Jesus. This last point will be the departure point for this sermon. Commended to Christ's care, the preacher will want to point out just how that is happening today.

- a. The preacher should not forget himself – he is a mask for God to speak to these people, called and sent to this spot. Christ is caring through me.
- b. The congregation itself likely has many good things happening. It is really easy to focus on the negatives, the losses, the painful, and the disappointing. Too many are not active in every parish mission. Those things hurt like an infected tooth and tend to take all our attention. But taking a step back and looking at the big picture often reveals that Christ and His Spirit are doing a great deal in our midst. Widows are comforted, sins forgiven, friendships strengthened, and children taught.
- c. Sometimes we need to lift our eyes and look a little outside our own congregation. Is there a mission down the road that is doing well? Is there something really good happening in the parish next door? Can we celebrate those things? Did a mission group come into your city and do much good?
- d. Sacraments – baptism is the washing of sins, not a symbol of it, but the real thing. Likewise the Lord’s Supper and absolution are miracles which we get to partake of so often that we are often blasé about them.

This sermon should leave the hearer somewhat marveling that Paul’s prayer has been fulfilled. The congregation in Ephesus is no more. The city is a ruin and the churches of that community are no longer ringing with the hymns of Christendom. But those hymns are still being sung, the Word is being proclaimed. Paul commends us into the care and keeping of God. He warns us about false teachers, wolves, who will try to lead us astray. It is not always rainbows and unicorns being a Christian. There is discernment which needs to happen. It is hard sometimes. We don’t want to make light of that. But we want to point our hearer to the work of God’s Spirit and Son right now in the midst of His people. Let them see that and rejoice.

OR

Romans 8:12-17 *(The editors have skipped the first eleven verses of Romans 8. We get them in other places in the liturgical year, but it really breaks the flow of Paul’s argument. I have included them for your consideration here. This reading occurs in Series A, proper 10. Here are notes from the last time we treated that.)*

<sup>1</sup> There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. <sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. <sup>5</sup> For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> For the mind that is set

*on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. <sup>8</sup> Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*

*<sup>9</sup> You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. <sup>10</sup> But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup> If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.*

*<sup>12</sup> So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. <sup>13</sup> For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. <sup>14</sup> For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. <sup>15</sup> For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” <sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*

*These verses present the other side of the thesis stated in chapters 1 and 3 of Romans. They go together. Paul has said that he is calling for an obedience of faith from the Gentiles (1:6). This is the thesis accomplished: the obedience of faith among the Gentiles. They believe that they too are sons of God, redeemed by his blood and adopted into the family of God. They are in the kingdom of the Spirit, not the kingdom of the flesh. That means that their lives are transformed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.*

*The preacher here will want to notice the variable imagery and metaphor that Paul uses throughout this passage. First he goes to the imagery of the banking world. We owe, we are debtors, and we have an obligation to the Spirit, no longer to the flesh. That flesh does not have the leverage over us that it once did, it has no collection agency that can really reach us. What is more, the Spirit is a much more attractive end than the end which is offered by the flesh. We live in the Spirit, we die in the flesh.*

*(Here we need to remind the reader that this is not a spirit versus physical dichotomy. The opposite of spirit is not physical, but fleshly. The spiritual life to which he commends the Romans involves loving neighbors with real deeds, it involves real food and drink, and it involves how we spend our money and how we conduct ourselves in our everyday business of life. We either do them to the glory of God through the Spirit or for the self-serving, broken and sinful flesh.)*

*The language of the bank, of owing and debtors, fails Paul at this point. In verse 14 he turns instead to the language of relationship, especially the language of adoption and sonship. This is contrasted with the relationship of a slave. (But wait, didn't he call us slaves just last week? Yes, but Paul is a shameless mixer of metaphors so just get used to it.) Notice what is different about the metaphor. The son who loves his father and obeys him not out of some fear or sense of duty, but out of love, approaches the task very differently. The task master who bullies or threatens me*

*into obedience will never get my heartfelt obedience. But the father who loves me and out of that love asks me to serve gets so much more. Think about the attitude you have when you do something for your beloved parent, spouse or children and that which you have when you do something coerced like writing a check to the bank every month to make a car payment. Is it not true? Now we are focusing not on whom we serve but the heart that serves. We serve as the adopted sons of God.*

*Adoption in the ancient world was very different than it is today. Quite often the adoptee was an adult. Infant mortality and politically expedient marriages often meant that upper class citizens were childless. They would find a second or third son in a lesser class family, probably a family who had fallen on some hard times, and offer to adopt the grown man as their own son. This would give them an heir and him an opportunity, it was a mutually beneficial arrangement. The rub was that in Roman law one could only be the son of one man at a time. He had to renounce his prior relationship. (This is why we renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways in the baptismal rite to this day.)*

*As with any adopted child, the adoption is not the choice of the child but of the adult. He might not be forced into the adoption, but he cannot suggest it or make it happen. That has to originate with the parent. What is more, the relationship is established by the adopters not the adoptee. In a human adoption it is attested to by the documents. In the Christian context it is the Spirit who attests to it. He cries out with us in our prayer "Abba, Father." Abba of course is Aramaic for "daddy." It is the cry of a child to a beloved father. This is the picture of our obedience. When dear daddy calls our name, we drop everything and run to his arms for the embrace that he has to give. There is a marvelous sermon in that!*

*Of course the whole point of adoption in the ancient world was the issue of inheritance, not so much the nurturing family to raise an otherwise abandoned child (that would actually come with the Christians and their concern for children.) We are heirs with Christ. This is why it is terribly important not to say that we are the sons and daughters of God. In the ancient world daughters did not inherit the same way. I am convinced, especially by Galatians 3:28, that Paul was making a radical equalizing statement when he said we were all sons of God. He was not excluding women but including them. They all stood as equal heirs of God's gracious kingdom. Had he said sons and daughters he would have immediately established a two tiered inheritance. I think this is the gross error of the NRSV and others in the PC community who want the Bible to be more gender friendly. Even though in North America and Europe women inherit equally, that is still not true in much of the world, especially the parts of the world in which the Church is growing rapidly.*

*The final verse contains a troubling little aside: 'only if we suffer with him...' What does Paul mean here? I think this could be building on the sermon from a couple of weeks ago where Jesus said that any who loved even family more than him were not worthy. The Devil will tempt us to renounce this son-ship in order to gain in this world. Resisting that temptation involves suffering at some level in every Christian's life. In times of persecution it might cost me my life. In this*

*time, it might cost me a friend, or a loved one, it might cost me a job opportunity or status in the community. But since we belong to another kingdom, the kingdom of the Spirit, we don't really belong to that anyway. Is Paul simply making us cognizant of the nature of the Kingdom and our discipleship?*

**Sermon Idea** “The Righteousness of God in Me” Romans 8:1-17 (That the Spirit of God would cause the hearer to believe and trust in the righteousness of God that he has already placed inside all of us.)

Paul unveils a tremendous mystery. Christ’s rescue of the human being from the trap of his own sinful mortality has resulted in us, the people of God, actually having the very righteousness of God imparted to us. This is not some goal he has set, but a deed he has accomplished in us. We are truly right with God. My life may at times be at odds that, but Paul dispensed with that last week. He too struggled with this bifurcation of his self.

For me right now, this means that my life is no longer a striving to achieve right-ness with God, but it flows out of that right-ness which Christ has establishes. The traffic flow has completely reversed, now instead of me bringing something to God, my life is God bringing something to me and through me to the rest of the world. The odd thing is that when I stop trying so hard to please God, I end up doing a lot more good. Paul will call us all children of God. Think of it this way. If I know that my father loves me, he will always be there for me, he would even visit me in prison, does that prompt me to hold up a liquor store to test it or does it prompt me to do something to make him proud and happy with me?

That state as a son of God is not something that someone one achieves, but which is simply true of us by the gift of God. He completely removes the living of our lives from the economy of buying and selling God’s favor. We already have it. We have the righteousness of Christ. Though we have not earned and do not deserve it, we have it, and that strangely has a much larger effect on our lives than all the striving and working does.

Matthew 7:15-23 (This text is read in the three year lectionary in Series A, but on proper 4 which is rarely read, only when Easter falls very early. The reading there also continues to vs. 29.)

<sup>15</sup>“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup>You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup>So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup>A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup>Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup>Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

<sup>21</sup>“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup>On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many

mighty works in your name?’<sup>23</sup> And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

*<sup>24</sup> “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. <sup>26</sup> And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. <sup>27</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”*

*<sup>28</sup> And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, <sup>29</sup> for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.*

## **Luther**

1. This sermon the Lord Christ preached at the conclusion of the long Sermon on the Mount, of which Matthew has given us an account in chapters 5 through 7. And this, because he well knows that where our Lord God builds a church, there the devil builds a tavern; nearby or, as the saying goes, where our Lord God has taken a clod of earth and made of it a beautiful human being, there the devil, seeking to match this work, has made toads and snakes. It has always been this way, that where the truth is preached, there the devil has intermingled false doctrine and heresy. Just look at a garden; inevitably when good seed is sown, weeds also crop up, and one has to work hard to uproot them, in order for the good seed to take root.

2. Since this situation will never change – that as long as this earth endures the devil will be present, domineering over the world and constantly sowing his weeds in with the good seed – for this reason the Lord, as our faithful teacher and archshepherd of our souls, exhorts and warns in today’s Gospel that we should be on our guard and beware of false prophets. Clearly he means: I have given you my Word and faithfully taught what you are to do, how we are correctly to understand the Ten Commandments, properly to pray, properly to fast, and to trust in God to sustain you. What matters now is that you be on guard, lest you be led astray from this teaching. I warn you, you will not be able to excuse your negligence. For I am sending you not among angels but among wolves, sowing you not among wheat but among tares. Therefore, be on guard so that you do not allow yourselves to be led astray.

3. Accordingly, the Lord wants us to adhere strictly to the Word and not allow ourselves to be diverted from it. However, what is contrary to the Word we should hate and flee from, as from the devil himself. For that reason no one should rest secure or sleep, for (as stated before) it will surely happen that where the Word is pure and undefiled, there wolves will not remain outside but will enter in without fail. We see this happening, first, in the church, then in secular government and family affairs. The wolf forces his way in everywhere, to see if he can pry us away from the Word and do us harm. The Christian church has God’s pure Word. This the devil cannot stand and so he ushers in all kinds of fanatics, who insinuate new and strange things about baptism, about the Lord’s Supper, about Christ himself, in order thereby to confuse and

lead people astray. And wherever these fanatics are found, we, as incurably inquisitive people, have the bad habit, really a besetting plague, that as soon as we hear something new, we fall away from the Word and stare immobilized after these fools, fanatics, and enthusiasts who steal in among us.

(Luther then proceeds through various spheres of the kingdom – state, family, and church demonstrating how the devil sneaks in – I found his reminiscing about Frederick the Wise worth repeating.)

10. Such a prince was Elector Frederick of Saxony, that noble beloved prince (whom I remember with affection). After he had risen in the morning, someone had to read the log book to him; and if he was traveling (as Master Peter Balbierer states), he never went to bed at night until he personally had listened to the record of expenditures and what had been consumed. He did this not only in foreign countries but also in his own cities. He watched his officials and tax collectors very carefully and trusted no one farther than he could see him. He was a prince who knew how to keep house. Princes who did not do this, who were easygoing and carefree, who trusted everyone and did not take matters into their own hands, came to ruin. A prince, however, who himself is involved in things, who himself keeps account, is an unusual leader among the princes of earth.

17. Let all this suffice for now, that we learn how the devil is slinking after us on all sides, in the church, leading us away from the Word wherever he can; in secular government he destroys peace and puts an end to obedience between government and subjects; in the management of the home he sows disorder and disobedience between parents and children, between masters, mistresses, and servants. This is the devil's spite and malice. Whoever, therefore, wants to thwart the devil's seduction needs to pay close attention in the home to the parents' commands; in secular government, to the prince's command; in the church to God's Word, and not to fanatical spirits or the word of other wicked men, who try to keep us from obeying God, government, and parents and persuade us to obey the devil.

18. To sum up, God's Word should be our shield and buckler. If we keep this in mind and act accordingly, the devil cannot lead us astray. But if we forsake God's Word, then the devil has already felled us. But God will not give us, nor let us preach, any other word than what he has already given us through the prophets, through his Son, through his apostles, the Word which he has revealed to us in these latter days. If we shall diligently hear and learn this Word, we can well fend off the false word, and the devil will have to yield. But if we do not want to hear or learn this Word, then the devil has already won the victory. May our loving God help us to hold firm and faithfully to his Word.

*Beware of the false prophets and teachers who appear to be a sheep but are really a ravenous wolf. We see them by their actions, not their words. Actions speak louder than words. Right after he speaks these words Jesus will heal the leper in 8:1-4 and from there go on a miracle spree in*

*which he does all sorts of good things. The implication is obvious. Judge Jesus by his deeds and not just by what he says. Folks can say anything, but deeds are a truer measure of the heart. This is especially true when dealing with administrators!*

*What do people see when they see our congregations? I know what we say, but what do they see? I remember asking my parish why our city should mourn if God were suddenly to remove us from its midst. They really could not come up with a good reason why the whole community should value us. It was a sobering day. Wolves are not just the other guys, sometimes we have found the enemy and he is us!*

*Then, as if that were not enough, Jesus goes on to say that not everyone who says, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom. It is the one who does the will of the Father. That’s encouraging! Some will petition for entrance into heaven and obviously expect to get in (I would guess that means they regularly attended church) and Jesus will say, “who are you?” A quick look at my life and yours reveals a real problem here. Maybe we should just preach the Epistle lesson today. This is sounding pretty rough.*

*But remember that when the Law is sharpest and most crushing, the Gospel is always the sweetest and most vital.*

*The man who does this is wise and builds on a rock. The fool who does not do these things builds his life upon the shifting sands. Notice this is not just about doctrine, but also about how you live your life. It is listening and putting into practice which makes us wise. God’s name is holy among us when the word is taught in truth and purity and we live holy lives according to it. Lutherans have too often gotten the word thing down, but neglected the holy life. We may laugh at our mothers for their piety and their LWML platitudes, but they are on to more than we give them credit. A little piety is not a bad thing in this old and corrupt world. It won’t make us rich and famous, but it does reflect nicely the peace of Christ.*

*When Jesus finished the Sermon on the Mount everyone stood there with their mouths open and astonished. He taught differently. The teaching style of the day seems to have involved a lot of footnotes. The scribe would rarely tell you what he thought, he would relate what others, especially revered scholars of the past had said.*

*Jesus apparently does not footnote any of this. He speaks as though this is his word, which it is. But their astonishment was not limited to the style of what he said; it was also astonishment at the content of what he said. Jesus has just said that there is no hope of keeping the law, and yet keeping the law is essential. The one who does the good things is the one who is really going to enter the kingdom of heaven. He sets up an impossible situation. You have to do this to go to heaven – you cannot do it, hence, you are destined for the long down escalator ride to the warm room in the basement.*

*Jesus immediately afterwards descends the mountain and is confronted by this leper, the leper said if Jesus wanted to he could make him well and Jesus wants to. He touches and sends him to the priest to offer the sacrifice which Moses prescribed as a witness to them. To whom? Is the action of the leper a testimony to all the folks who standing here stunned by Jesus words? Does*

*he send this leper to fulfill the law to show them how it is done? Is it the case that we are extricated from our dilemma by the Jesus who heals our sinfulness and empowers us to fulfill the law? Or as Paul says he calls the gentiles to an obedience which comes from faith.*

*If you take god out of good, all it leaves you with is “o”*

*If our lives are to be the lives which God recognizes in the last day, which are the lives fit for heaven, it will not be because we have said the right words or even believed the right things. It will be because Christ has made those lives righteous by his blood and he has filled us with His Spirit who empowers our lives to acts of genuine piety and goodness. Where is the boasting? It is only to be found in Christ.*

**Sermon Idea:** What will he say to me? (That the Holy Spirit of God expunge self-idolatry from the hearer and create in him/her sturdy trust in Jesus.)

Let's face it, Jesus' words today are tough. He tells us that just thinking you are on his team isn't good enough. Many will say "Lord, Lord!" but he will not recognize them. Do you suppose any of them will be Lutherans? Will any of them be members of this congregation? Will it be one of us?

What's the measure here? That also is not good news. The good tree bears good fruit. That may not be an evaluation I am entirely comfortable undergoing, especially with eternal salvation on the line. I made some pretty dramatic vows in my confirmation and I have to admit that I have a spotty record at keeping them. Those words about casting a diseased tree which bears poor fruit into the fire sound grim indeed.

Even wonder workers are not immune. Some will note that they did extraordinary things for Jesus and his kingdom. They cast out demons. They performed miracles. The prophesied and preached in his name. The Lord will sternly order that these evil doers be cast away from him into an eternal fire.

Did we really say, "This is the Gospel of the Lord" when we finished that reading. Really, Gospel?

But that might be just where this text is supposed to bring you. I once went over this material in a New Testament class at CU. At the end of this section I asked how this made them feel. One student looked up at me and said this made her feel really icky. I thought that was perfect. Just where she should be.

The wise preacher will want to continue reading. The very next verses, and you have to remember that Matthew made no verse divisions nor chapter divisions. The very next account is of Jesus coming down the mountain and being met by a leper. That in itself was not supposed to happen. Lepers were to stand a ways off and yell "Unclean!" This leper did not. He broke the health code and the Torah. He came and knelt at Jesus feet. But listen carefully to what he says and what Jesus says. He tells Jesus that if he wants to, Jesus can make him clean. Jesus then breaks the Torah. He touches him and says that he is willing.

Normally when healthy people encounter contagious sick people, they get sick. That is why the health code and the Torah prohibit that touch. They are both protecting the healthy person. But Jesus is no average healthy person. He is the holy God whose touch does not contaminate him but imparts holiness and health to the person whom he touches. The leper is healed.

Herein lies the great secret to the upside-down and strange kingdom of God. Jesus was making you feel icky because he came to touch, heal, and forgive the icky people just like you. It the old and sinful man who trembles at the thought of the test which Jesus lays in our Gospel reading. The new man, the person whom he raised from the font, that one does not know that fear. Rather that person has risen from kneeling before Christ and knows the health and holiness of Christ's touch in baptismal waters, sacramental meals, and absolution's promise.

The Gospel reading today might leave us wondering what Jesus will say to us. Will we be one of those folks whom he sends away? We all deserve to be. But Christ reaches out and does what he wants to do. He touches us, has touched us, will touch us and we are holy, we are whole, we are healed.