

## Trinity XI (One Year Series)

Today the first reading will speak of temptation so it is appropriate to remember the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The Gospel writers tell this story early in the ministry of Jesus, in fact, right after his baptism. Jesus has been fasting and it says he is hungry. The Devil tempts him to turn stone into bread, if he is "truly the Son of God." Jesus successfully resists this temptation, but the Devil is not done with him. He takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the earth and offers to Jesus that he can have them all if he simply bows his knee in worship to Satan.

I want to think about that second temptation for a moment. Jesus has just resisted using his power for self-serving greedy ends. Now he is given the opportunity to use his power for the healthy and salutary governance of others. Can you imagine what welfare, health, and other programs Jesus would have been able to pull off if he had been emperor? What justice system or education program would have he developed? Think of the good he could have done.

The second temptation is really tied to the first. He resisted the temptation of self-serving vice, and now his very strength, his righteous and manly virtue becomes the second temptation. Satan seems to be saying, "so you won't use this for yourself...use it for others."

Jesus however eschews the whole notion of power as the solution to the problems of the world. I hate to break it to all the secularists who believe that all our woes would be solved if only we elect the right man to be President and if Congress could get its act together. A functioning legislature won't solve the problem. Jesus knows this. The solutions of government, policies, and the power-plays are at best only temporary goods. They too will be corrupted. He rejects the power solution. His road is a road of seemingly impotent love. He will not ascend to earthly thrones to wear purple and linen, but he will wear a purple robe which Pilate mockingly has put on him. The soldiers will gamble for his linen garment, lest they tear it. He will ascend naked to a cross, to wear a crown of thorns, to rule this world by dying for its sins, so that his legitimate and heavenly power and authority may be wielded through his crucified hands for the real blessing and benefit of those enslaved to Satan's power.

I digress from the point here yet a necessary digression. I want to point out that Satan is really unoriginal and rather stuck in his ways. What we see in the temptation of Jesus is a pattern to which our adversary frequently returns as he would lead us astray. For our purposes we want to understand that the person who has successfully resisted the first temptation of Satan to jump into the carnal sins of this flesh and follow Christ, will now find that his very success becomes his second temptation. It is good to follow Jesus and be a Christian. It is good to put away, as far as we can, the fleshly desires such as greed, lusts, malice, and all the things which are antithetical to the love of Christ. It is good to do.

If we have managed to put our lives into some sort of Christian order, through the indwelling of the Spirit, that very success surely will be the next occasion for Satan's temptation. We will soon

be tempted to believe that somehow this new-found order in my life, this proper regulation, this victory over sin is somehow what sets me apart from the other human being, the one who is still wallowing in sin. I have overcome this lust, this passion, this flaw, while this other poor wretch has not. We might believe that this is what separates us from one another.

Jesus calls this spiritual pride to an accounting in the Gospel reading today. He addresses his parable and subsequent action toward those who view others with contempt. We preach today not to those without faith, but to those with faith, to those who have resisted temptation to some degree, who have gotten their act together, whose marriage is good, whose children have stayed off drugs, who have taught the Sunday School and VBS classes, served on the committees, and put the offering in the plate. Satan has a particular strategy for you and your only hope is Jesus just as much as the only hope for the drug addict lying in the gutter this morning is the same Jesus. You both need him just as much as the other one does.

The results of this sort of spiritual arrogance is all around us. Luther preached to people who were good-workaholics who thought that they were earning points to get to heaven. He liberated them from that and disconnected their good works from the divine economy. The only payment which earned us heaven was the gift of Christ. That was good, but what we have done with that may not be. Our audience is not the fearful medieval Christian who is working his way to heaven. Our folks have drunk deeply of the freedom message and have often exercised it by doing nothing, or as close to nothing as they can manage. We have parishes with large rosters of folks who claim membership and pathetically small Sunday attendance. We preach to people who are indistinguishable from a larger population. Their TV viewing habits are demonstrably indistinguishable from the larger population. We have heard the Luther message, or at least think that we have, but we have used our freedom as a license to do nothing or very little. It seems like in most of the parishes I have served that only about 20% of the folks in my parishes really got what Jesus and Luther said. They were really motivated by the Gospel to do more than the law required.

### **Collect of the Day**

Almighty and everlasting God, always more ready to hear than we to pray and to give more than we either desire or deserve, pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving those things of which our conscience is afraid and giving us those good things that we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one god, now and forever.

*This prayer is built on some really important relationship pieces. As you read it, consider the way it portrays God to us. He is standing there ready to hear us, in fact more ready to hear us than we are often to speak to him. When we get to the first lesson and we see sulking Cain who doesn't want to talk to God about what has happened, God seeks him out. God is always ready to*

*listen to us, even when our own guilt tells us that we should be afraid of him. He is ready to listen to us in love.*

*He is always ready to give us more than we either desire or deserve. Again, we will see Cain in this, but also the Pharisee and the Publican of the Gospel lesson and the Disciples who are shooing away the children in the Gospel too. God is ready to surprise us with his goodness, always. We think we have this system figured out, and our guilty conscience is afraid of what that means. We deserve God's wrath. We know that, hence we are loathe to speak to him, hoping in some childish way to avoid his attention.*

*But the prayer remembers that God is always willing to give us more than we deserve, and more than we can even desire. The prodigal thinks all he can hope for is the place of a slave in his father's house. He surely cannot ask to be a son again. But the father lavishes the robe and the ring, the shoes and feast on his son who was dead and is now alive, lost and is found.*

*So the person who prays this prayer and believes what he or she says is confident, even bold to ask that God would pour down on us the abundance of his mercy, the forgiveness of the sins which plague our guilty conscience and all the blessings which we do not merit except that Jesus has won them for us.*

*This is a great prayer, not because it asks for all these things but because of what it says about God. The assumptions that lay underneath this prayer are profound and really important and very difficult to preach.*

*As we come to these texts today, and indeed every day, look for and notice what God is doing. He is carefully seeking out his sinful children, even the really rotten ones. He is welcoming children into his arms. Paul speaks of new life given to dead people. God is even reaching out in love to the hypocrites who sit in our own pews, perhaps who stand in the pulpit. He will not let their pride bring them down, so he brings them down low, points out their sin, so that he may heal and restore them.*

*Genesis 4:1-14 (We read this passage in the 25<sup>th</sup> Proper of year C. I thought it worth the effort to include the story of Cain and his family. It is a sad story and one which the author of Genesis gives us as a warning and an indictment of the way we are. Reading it we find much of ourselves therein and must come to the conclusion that we are more like Cain and his ilk than Abel.*

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD."<sup>2</sup> And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.<sup>3</sup> In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,<sup>4</sup> and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering,<sup>5</sup> but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.<sup>6</sup> The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?<sup>7</sup> If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."

<sup>8</sup> Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. <sup>9</sup> Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?” <sup>10</sup> And the LORD said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. <sup>11</sup> And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. <sup>12</sup> When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” <sup>13</sup> Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear. <sup>14</sup> Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.” <sup>15</sup> Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. <sup>16</sup> Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

<sup>17</sup> Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch. <sup>18</sup> To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad fathered Mehujael, and Mehujael fathered Methushael, and Methushael fathered Lamech. <sup>19</sup> And Lamech took two wives. The name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. <sup>20</sup> Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. <sup>21</sup> His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. <sup>22</sup> Zillah also bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.

<sup>23</sup> Lamech said to his wives:

“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;  
you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:  
I have killed a man for wounding me,  
a young man for striking me.

<sup>24</sup> If Cain's revenge is sevenfold,  
then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold.”

<sup>25</sup> And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth,

*Sin doesn't take long to go right to the bottom. It is not like Adam and Eve slowly devolved from righteousness – say 99% righteous and only after many generations did total depravity show up. Humanity goes right to the very bottom immediately – brother on brother murder. It doesn't get much worse than this.*

*We learn some things about God from this passage which are important to note:*

- 1. He has standards- the offering of Cain is not accepted. Justice is not shortchanged.*
- 2. He is pro-active – he seeks out and seeks to warn Cain prior to the sin.*

3. *God does not force Cain – he knows about the sin which is at the door, and he does not tie up Cain and prevent him from doing what he does. God allows him freedom to sin. He seems to value our free will more than we do sometimes. Abel paid a terrible price for Cain’s free will.*
4. *God is very gracious. He comes to Cain knowing he had murdered Abel and offers him the opportunity to confess and repent. Even though Cain does not take him up on that, he still has a gracious sign to put on Cain.*
5. *Even after his sin, God desired relationship with Cain – he wanted him to “do well” and to “be acceptable.” His love is not overcome by the monstrosity of sin.*

*There is much which speaks important messages to the reader in this passage. Cain was entrapped, captured by sin. This image is picked up elsewhere in the Bible to describe sin, as a predator which is ready to capture us. Several points in the Epistles speak of a person who has been “trapped” or “snared” by sin and enjoins the community of believers to restore such a person gently. (Galatians, I John, Hebrews, etc.) Outside the relationship (faith) with God we are vulnerable and subject to such ensnarement. It waits eagerly at the doors of our homes and churches and lives.*

*One could argue that the first sin after the fall into sin was the sin of hubristic pride. We want to be the arbiter, the judge, the decider. But this is God’s job, not mine. We want to be the one who holds the power of life and death, who stubbornly refuses to submit to the will of God. Our current culture has even made such attitudes heroic. I have read more than one fiction writer who has portrayed his “Cain” character as the hero of this scene for refusing to bend his will to the will of some god. Or do they pick up on the fact that Cain is resisting responsibility? But Cain has slain his brother and brought great sorrow to the world. His brother’s blood cries out to God, seeking justice, a justice which God actually forbears for the sake of Cain. Jesus says that God forbore all such justice until he achieved that justice in Christ (Romans 3).*

*It is not natural, but it is real that we are prone to such pride. I say it is not natural because this is not the way God made people. Adam and Eve in the garden were not such proud people. It is real, however, that our very nature has been broken in the fall from such a state. Now, we are like a bent arrow, no matter how you turn it, no matter how you fit it to the bow, it always flies crookedly. We are too proud to follow the course laid out for us. The television with a flawed tube will present a lousy picture no matter how you adjust it. Encourage, browbeat, threaten, pass laws, or put him into group therapy, the sinner will remain the sinner and find some way to sin. As God knows, that sinner needs to die so a new man may rise up in his place.*

*But this text is more than just foundational for the Gospel text. A number of interesting questions arise. Why does God not accept Cain’s offering? Many point to the fact that while Abel offers the first fruits of his flock, Cain only brings “an offering” from his fields. But that is not explicitly stated and it probably needs to be heard with some caution if for no other reason that the whole contemptuous pride which is our theme today. (I am sure glad I wrote my offering check before I*

*paid my mortgage! – O wait, spiritual pride again, aaaagh! Who will free me from this body of death? Praise be to Christ our Savior!)* This idea, however, has some worthy homiletical implications. God is always interested in the heart. If Cain's offering was given out of his excess, rather than a true "first fruits" it suggests that his worship, while externally identical to Abel's had a heart problem. God saw that problem and rejected that worship.

What is up with this first conversation God has with Cain? "If you do well, you will be accepted." Sounds like a works righteousness to me. I don't like reading that dynamic into every conversation God has with folks, especially in these sorts of texts. The truth of the matter is, neither Abel nor Cain are capable of "doing well" anymore than you and I are. But God is exhorting Cain to resist sin. Being resigned to failure is not a recipe for sanctification, let's just admit that. We would all benefit from a little more struggle to "do well" in my life and your life.

God's second conversation with Cain also raises some interesting questions. What is this mark which is placed on Cain? Regrettably some have pointed to skin color for this. Let's just take that off the table. We don't know. Was this a tattoo of some sort? We just don't know. What is even more interesting is that this is actually an act of mercy on God's part. Abel's blood is not crying out for mercy for Cain, you can bet. Shed blood cries out for vengeance. Or does it? The preacher might want to make the connection to another blood which cries out to God, not for vengeance but for mercy, for gracious forgiveness. Of course, I am referring to the blood of Jesus, also shed unjustly, also occasion for God' to act.

The writer of the old hymn "Glory be to Jesus" plays with this. If you are not familiar with it, it is in the hymnal, in the Lenten season. Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies, but the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries." (My Father had his catechism class memorize a number of hymns, this being one of them. I can still annoy my children on long trips by singing all the verses. More importantly, when I am under the assault of my foe, I can sing them to myself and be cheered, directed, and comforted by them.)

This story also can be fitted into the whole book of Genesis in an interesting way. As we have noted, the post-fall record begins here, not with some gradual decline into debauchery, but an immediate plunge into the worst sort of sin: fratricide, one brother taking the life of another. The book of Genesis then weaves tension filled, brother relationships into the stories which follow. Isaac and Ishmael are put into tension and eventually Ishmael is banished. Jacob and Esau fight bitterly with one another, and not fairly. Yet they forgave and reconciled (Gen 33). Even more striking is the last story of Genesis. There we see Joseph forgiving his brothers for their attempt on his life. They did not pick up a knife or a stone and kill him, but they essentially left that up to the Ishmaelite slave traders who would sell him into the markets of Egypt. A young Hebrew slave could hardly be expected to live long in that society. It was murder with a different weapon, Egypt's slave pits. Except it did not work and they discovered that the brother they thought they killed was later the man before whom they had to bow.

These two stories serve as a bookend and thematic drivers for the entire book of Genesis. It is really a book about the forgiveness of brothers, mercy shown to people who don't deserve it in

*the least, God's dealing with the worst sorts of sins. If we read the story of Cain in isolation from that of the rest of the book, it comes off sounding terrible, but that is not the real story, nor the whole story. God has mercy and forgiveness for people like Cain.*

*We also wondered whether about most folks who quote the line "Am I my brother's keeper." Do they have any idea of this context? Are they in fact using this line to excuse their indifference to what their neighbor does? Do they use this to justify the fact that they will do nothing? Are they aware even that this was Cain trying and failing to hide from the responsibility of his brother's murder?*

*If you want a really fun way to preach this, you might just ask if our punishment is also too great for us to bear as well? God puts a mark on Cain. God puts a mark on us as well, the mark of the cross, the punishment for sins, the unbearable death that we could not endure, but Jesus did for us. We bear that mark, and now no one can take our life from us, not even our ancient enemy, for his head has been crushed, his power ended in that cross.*

**Sermon Idea:** A punishment too great for me to bear (OT - That the Holy Spirit would strengthen the faith of the hearer that it may bear fruits of love, peace, joy, and kindness in this place.)

In a sense, this sermon is the first sermon run backwards. That one has a goal of us being the little children on God's lap, this one has us remember that we really much more like Cain than we want to admit and then has us hear God's gracious words to Cain spoken to us in our baptism.

God confronts Cain in the OT text and lays upon him the consequences of his sinfulness. Cain objects that this is too much and so God puts a mark on him which will preserve his life.

This sermon wants to read this text a something of a surprising analogy, which God was in effect establishing a pattern which would play out in a shockingly similar way in the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ and our own baptism into Christ's death and resurrection. To do that, we will have to establish a couple of things. I believe that the best way to put someone into the position of Cain is to talk death. We are so afraid of it, we don't like to talk about this, but that is exactly the point. It is a burden too heavy for us to bear, thus we hide from it. We have gone to tremendous pharmacological and medical lengths to forestall it. But death comes to us; there is no way we can finally escape. The punishment is inexorable that way. But it doesn't have to be death. It could be something else too. But in some way you want the hearer to be feeling this burden.

If you have the capability of showing a video, consider this little clip which I saw recently at a conference: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvmVGFA-AzA> The man in the video is a coffin maker who makes coffins for the natural burial movement. His reflections on this are quite profound.

The sermon will want to then address that second conversation which Cain has with God in which God puts a mark on Cain. We don't know what that is, don't go into that. But that God puts a mark on him is similar to what God says about us. In Baptism we put the sign of the holy

cross both upon the forehead and upon the heart to mark this one as redeemed by Christ the crucified. That means that we cannot really be killed. Yes, the Romans took the life of Paul, but they did not really take his life. That life was tied up with Jesus on the day Paul was baptized into the death of Christ. Likewise our lives have been tied up with Jesus and we have been marked.

The burden is too much for us, God knows that. We are childlike in our helplessness before death and the realities of our sin. God's mark preserves us as well.

Here the preacher may want to move into the Epistle and notice how that affected Paul. Or perhaps the gospel and see Jesus blessing the children. By removing this fear from our lives as well, Jesus has freed us to be something else in this life right now. We are the living invitations to our neighbors to be part and parcel of this kingdom, but this kingdom also takes real and positive shape in our lives. Jesus welcomes the weak and helpless. Paul is fearless before death, fighting the good fight. During WW II the Norwegian Lutheran Bishop, Eivind Berggrav is supposed to have been confronted by an SS interrogator who said, "Don't you realize I can have you killed!?" The Bishop in response simply said, "And what would you do me then?" Dead, he would be out of the power of the Nazi's, but he was able to face down that evil without fear because he trusted this mark, this sign which God had put upon him in Baptism.

Psalm 50:7-23

<sup>7</sup> "Hear, O my people, and I will speak;  
O Israel, I will testify against you.  
I am God, your God.

<sup>8</sup> Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you;  
your burnt offerings are continually before me.

<sup>9</sup> I will not accept a bull from your house  
or goats from your folds.

<sup>10</sup> For every beast of the forest is mine,  
the cattle on a thousand hills.

<sup>11</sup> I know all the birds of the hills,  
and all that moves in the field is mine.

<sup>12</sup> "If I were hungry, I would not tell you,  
for the world and its fullness are mine.

<sup>13</sup> Do I eat the flesh of bulls  
or drink the blood of goats?

<sup>14</sup> Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,  
and perform your vows to the Most High,

<sup>15</sup> and call upon me in the day of trouble;  
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me."

- <sup>16</sup> But to the wicked God says:  
“What right have you to recite my statutes  
or take my covenant on your lips?  
<sup>17</sup> For you hate discipline,  
and you cast my words behind you.  
<sup>18</sup> If you see a thief, you are pleased with him,  
and you keep company with adulterers.  
<sup>19</sup> “You give your mouth free rein for evil,  
and your tongue frames deceit.  
<sup>20</sup> You sit and speak against your brother;  
you slander your own mother's son.  
<sup>21</sup> These things you have done, and I have been silent;  
you thought that I was one like yourself.  
But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.  
<sup>22</sup> “Mark this, then, you who forget God,  
lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver!  
<sup>23</sup> The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me;  
to one who orders his way rightly  
I will show the salvation of God!”

*This psalm, from the perspective of God, gives a chilling way to read both the OT and Gospel readings today. It also speaks to the fact that our worship, the fact that we are here, is not really the great thing for God that we often imagine it is. God has no need for us to sing his praises. He has angels who do that much better than we do. God, without needing it, is after something else, our hearts. His love for us compels us, but we, as the people whom God rails against in the psalm, want to turn this into some sort of commercial exchange, as if we are selling and God is buying from us.*

Ephesians 2:1-10 Lent 4B

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— <sup>3</sup> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. <sup>4</sup> But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

<sup>11</sup> Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— <sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

*I extended the reading for our discussion’s purpose. Paul has specific good works in mind when he writes verse 10. I personally take Ephesians to be Paul’s last will and testament letter. I am convinced by Luke T. Johnson’s reconstruction of this as the most plausible. If he is correct this letter comes at the end of Paul’s apostolic career and his life. He has struggled with the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians for over a decade. The good work which God has prepared for his audience is the good work of living in a unity which God has created in Christ.*

*As we have talked about this passage in the past, we have been very interested in the tension which is latent in verse 10. The Lutheran ethos often struggles with the idea of good works, but this text demands that we address this. Preaching which does not call for those good works, which never addresses sanctification is not really Christian preaching, it fails to be conformed to the Word of God which often calls for such good works. If we preach without such a call to goodness and works, we are preaching only part of the Gospel – and our people are poorer for it. To point to the lives of people and see the handiwork of God is not detracting from God’s role in salvation nor is it preaching the law.*

*We also thought that the preacher of this text really needed to tell a story, a story of a person who has passed from death to life – the person who had been at the bottom of humanity’s garbage heap to another place. I remember a woman who sat in my church one Sunday and wept and wept. She and her boyfriend, later husband, had headed out from Milwaukee, Wisconsin to get away from all that her parents and his parents meant to them. They had run out of gas in Salt Lake City about ten years earlier and started a life here. Now their children were evoking the very same words from her mouth that her mother had used and she realized she needed what her mom had. She would become the Sunday school superintendent eventually, did great things for us. She spoke eloquently of what God had done to change her heart and her life. We need to make these words of Paul take on life, flesh and blood.*

*That said, there are at least ten sermons in this text. This is one of the richest parts of the Bible for the preacher. My guess is that every one of our congregations has someone who has verses 8-9 as a confirmation verse. It is my sister’s.*

*A really interesting exercise to have a bible study do with this text is to chart out what happens to the human being in these ten verses. They start out dead, a corpse. Enslaved to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit at work in the sons of disobedience, we were children of wrath. But then the grace of God came to us. God, rich in mercy and filled with love for his creation, loved us when we were dead. He made us alive together with Christ, graciously, and raised us up*

*with Him and seated us at His right hand. It is a gift, not a reward, you cannot boast about that one. We are God's workmanship, created in Christ to do good things.*

*Notice how far we have come. We started out dead, then we were made alive, but this is not life on some sort of a respirator, some cruel mockery of what we should be, this is real ambulatory life. We are up and about, doing the good things that has prepared for us, so we can walk in those good works. It is a total transformation from death to life, full and real life.*

*This is a great place to talk about the scriptural concept of Grace. That is a word we use altogether too easily but don't spend the time to describe and explain it for people. One could do a marvelous sermon on just that word. Grace comes from the Greek for gift. At its root it is all about gift, a free gift, with no strings attached.*

*But while God's love is unconditionally given, it is post-conditional. What I mean by that is that while we do not earn the love, the love transforms our condition. I think too many Lutherans have verses 8-9 memorized but have not paid enough attention to verse 10. We are saved, yes, but not like all the junk I have saved and stored up in my garage. We are saved to a real and active purpose. We are saved to be God's workmanship in this day and age, in this time and place. That is another really important sermon for us to hear in verse 10 as it reminds us that the salvation of God is a real presence in this world and the living of our life.*

**Sermon Idea:** Saved for a purpose (Epistle Reading - That the hearer would rejoice in the grace of God and act upon it in his or her life.)

You may have heard it said that the seven last words of the church are "We've never done it that way before." I am convinced that one of my parishes will actually die with the words "That's a good idea pastor, somebody ought to do that" on the last parishioner's lips. God has not saved us like the junk I have saved in my basement and garage, most of which will finally see the light of day when we get around to a garage sale someday. God has saved us to living and vibrant, purposeful life. Those grumbling Israelites would eventually march around Jericho until its walls fell. More graphically, look at what Paul portrays for us today. Just look at how he describes us in the first verses of this epistle lesson, dead, morally, spiritually, enslaved to the devil. Helpless. But God has had grace upon us. He has given a life we could not achieve. We are really good at repeating those words of Ephesians 2:8-9. They are engrained upon our Lutheran minds, but friends follow it through the tenth verse. We were saved to do good. We have heard the past three weeks of Lent about Jesus great victory over our foe. We have heard that our lives, created in the cross of Christ, will take that shape. Last week, we saw Jesus righteous anger at the sins of the world and saw the standard of God's law. Today, graciously received into the family of God, seated at the side of Jesus, partakers of his very body and blood, forgiven in this absolution, he sends us out of these doors to be His people in this place, to love with his love, to care with his compassion, to serve with his heart, to comfort people with the comfort that comes from him. We are not just feeders at the trough of forgiveness, we are also the thoroughbreds who are carefully cared for by God for a purpose, a race says Paul, a journey. As Jesus says in the Gospel lesson to day, to walk in the light, not in the darkness. Know and believe this: The kingdom of

God lives through you and in you when you do the good thing, whatever that may be. You are not buying anything from God, but you are instead living out what he has given you. If you look inside your heart today and cannot find that he has given you anything, please come and talk to me, this sermon is not for you. You need another word from me. But if you can look back on your life and see that God has been blessing you in His Son Jesus, hear the good news today, go out and live it today and tomorrow. God loves to see that.

OR

I Corinthians 15:1-10

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand,<sup>2</sup> and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

<sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,<sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,<sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.<sup>6</sup> Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.<sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.<sup>8</sup> Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.<sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.<sup>10</sup> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.<sup>11</sup> *Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.*

*Paul notes that he was the most unlikely candidate to be an apostle. But God's promise is not in vain (vs 10) By the Grace of God he was what he was – an apostle. By the same grace of God we are what we are – God's resurrected and eternally living child. We are his precious and dear children. We are what we are!*

*Paul also says, "According to the scriptures..." We wondered which scriptures spoke of Jesus death and resurrection? We looked at Genesis 22, the binding of Isaac, but also Judges 11, the vow and sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter. Jonah is an OT story that prefigures the death and resurrection of Jesus. Of course Isaiah 53 and other places in the prophets. Psalm 118, 22, et. al.*

*The letter to the Corinthians is a grab bag of problems that might make our parish look positively healthy. The Corinthians were really messed up and Paul seems to see their mis-belief in the resurrection as the key to all their problems. Many commentators think that this glorious 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of this letter is the key to understanding Paul's whole argument in the letter.*

*It is also worth remembering that Paul likely wrote these words before any of the Gospels were committed to paper. This is some of the earliest accounts we have in writing of the preaching and teaching of Christianity.*

*Paul urges them to remember these things first. This is a reminder, Paul has preached all this stuff before, but they need to be called back to that preached message. This message is the heart and the core of salvation itself. Of first importance is the Gospel narrative. Christ died for us and Christ was buried and raised in accordance with the Scriptures. This the heart of the Gospel story, rooted in an historical fact attested to by numerous witnesses. Cephas (that is Peter), and the twelve all saw him and to a man will be willing to die a martyr's death rather than traduce that confession. He also appeared to up to 500 folks at once; although, Luke does not record that story for us in Acts but this is not the only place where we get an inkling that there were many more resurrection appearances and witnesses. At Paul's writing, it appears that there are a number of witnesses who are still accessible, one could go and talk to them, although some have died. Then he appeared to James, presumably the James who at the writing of this letter was the head of the congregation in Jerusalem, author of the letter by that name in Scripture, and the brother of Jesus. Then to the other apostles, which tells us that there were more apostles than the twelve. Last of all, he appeared to Paul, like one untimely born, a strange thing, out of place. Of course this is the appearance we know perhaps better than any other, this is the road to Damascus. From the dating of Paul's letters and the mention of this event in Galatians 1 and 2 we can pretty well concur that the Damascus road event took place within five years of Pentecost.*

*Paul is the least of the Apostles, but he is still an apostle. He sees his whole ministry as a great gift from God, spurring him on to work harder than any of them. But it does not matter who preached, the message is the same, they believed, and through that faith they are saved.*

*The preacher today will want to focus on the first part of this pericope, it seems to me. The proclamation of the resurrection which we celebrate today is the center and the heart and core of our faith. The Genesis reading above has slain us all spiritually. The Gospel reading as well speaks of us in terms which can only be fatal. We are corpses waiting the resurrection. This is what we have come to celebrate, this is the center of Christianity. Jesus has risen from the dead. He is alive, and in a relationship with us right now. There is power in that proclamation, the power of salvation itself. How will we preach it today with power? How will we connect our people to that powerful message? Will they experience that power today? What would that feel like? Do they, like the Corinthians, need reminding of this?*

**Sermon Idea:** We are an Easter People! (That the Holy Spirit would strengthen in some, and impart to others, the identity that we are the people of Easter, defined by this event.)

The preacher of this sermon will likely want to have in mind that the word for Easter in most languages is actually Passover. That word has perhaps a little more to say to us than Easter, which is a word without meaning outside of this day. We are the people who have passed over from death to life, from sin to righteousness, from slavery to the real freedom in Christ.

Some of our folks probably feel like they have been reduced, the Church is in trouble. We thought of the Native American who had been reduced to living on a reservation after roaming freely. Many feel like we are becoming an enclave church, a remnant which is in hiding. To raise

your head and confess your Lord is a dangerous thing sometimes. The former Archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Francis George said that he would die his bed, his successor would die in prison, his successor would die as a martyr in the public square, and his successor will pick up the shards of a broken world and start to rebuild society as the church has always done.

To a broken and dying world, Christianity has always proclaimed a completely contrary vision. Like the children of Israel who stood there under Moses staff as the waters closed back over the army of Pharaoh, we stand today and look back at the enemy vanquished and forward to the freedom that lies before. As one Jewish guy said to me, "Every Jewish holiday boils down to this: They tried to kill us, we got away, let's eat." We are a people defined by our escape, our escape from sin, death, and devil, the forces of this world which would do us terrible harm, even devour us.

This imparts an intense joy. We are free and the calluses from shackles can still be felt on our wrists and ankles. We remember those bonds and we marvel at the lightness of hands which work freely instead of under the lash of obligation and the tyranny of earning. Christ has taken all that to a grave, nailed our sins to a cross, and now they are buried there, never to rise again. We are free.

But Easter people are not just free from, but they are also free to something. God has risen from the dead so he may care for us. He has called us to life from the waters of Baptism so we may live in the newness of life. (Ephesians 2) That is not some shapeless joy, but a real life lived and a real joy embodied in the relationships which we have. We are an Easter people, a people whom the joy of Christ has possessed and it shows. Here it would be good for the preacher to have some examples from his parish of that joy. The lately departed saint who is lovingly remembered, the joy of a fundraiser recently held which was really fun even though you were extracting money from people's wallets. The joy of a work party which cleaned up the property and was a great time.

The Christian today finds joy not in the standing we have in the world. The world will not love what we say. As John says, they have not understood us because they do not understand him. When we lose the need for that approval of the world, the enclave is blown open. Jesus calls us to live as he lived in this world, rubbing elbows and shoulders with the sinners, being a beacon of light, laughing in the midst of this world's pain because he knows the love of the Father and the Father knows us.

Luke 18:9-14 (*This reading is also found in the 25<sup>th</sup> Proper of year C. There it extends to the 17<sup>th</sup> verse which I have included here and to which the notes above and below refer.*)

<sup>9</sup> He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast

twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ <sup>13</sup> But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

<sup>15</sup> Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. <sup>16</sup> But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. <sup>17</sup> Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

<sup>18</sup> And a ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

## **Luther**

25. But mark how the publican’s word and prayer harmonize when he says: “God, be thou merciful to me a sinner.” Where did he learn to speak thus to God, or how dare he conceive, arrange and express such words? For according to reason and human judgment they do not agree, and no man can force such a prayer out of his own heart and thoughts, short as it is. The words of the Pharisee: “God, I thank thee, that I am not as the rest of men, extortioners, unjust,” etc., are what a pious man can truly say, and should say.

For no one dare be such a liar that his conscience does not accuse him of being a robber, adulterer, etc., but must say the truth, and not allow the reputation of a good conscience to be taken from him, and he must be a pious man, who says this in truth. On the other hand, a villain can of course also speak thee words: “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” as they are oftener spoken by rogues than by the truly penitent, pious people. Yet, who else would speak them but a sinful and condemned person? Nevertheless the sentence here changes and threatens to become false on both sides, you may turn and shift it as you please.

26. But taken in a fundamental sense it is a speech and example that belongs to the schools and to the theology of Christians, which the world calls heretical. For as I said, no reason can harmonize it, nor can any man, be he as high, wise and learned as he may, harmonize what this publican has here put together, to form and construct a prayer from words entirely opposed to each other: “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” Yes, surely this is the art of a great master, which is wholly and entirely feign, high and far above human understanding.

27. For there were never such words uttered since God in the beginning permitted his voice to be heard, and he spoke unto man. The Scriptures say that the in Paradise God said to man, (Gen 2:17): “For in the day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die.” On Mount Sinai when God gave the law it read as follows, Ex. 20:5: I Jehovah thy God am a jealous God,” that is, an angry God, “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children upon the third and upon the fourth generation of them that hate me.” In short that man should know that sin is condemned, and God’s wrath and punishment are declared against it.

With this it does not at all agree or harmonize that such a sinner and condemned person dare come before God and say "Be thou merciful to me a sinner!" For these two, sin and mercy, are opposed to each other, like fire and water. Mercy does not belong where sin abounds, but wrath and punishment. How then does this man discover the art to unite the two and harmonize them, and how dare he desire and call for grace to cover his sins? To this belongs more than to know the law the Ten Commandments, which the Pharisee also knew, and it is a different art, of which the Pharisee knew nothing at all, and all men of themselves no nothing.

28. This is preaching the precious Gospel of God's grace and mercy in Christ, which is published and offered to condemned sinners without any merit of their own. This publican must have heard of this also, and the Holy Spirit must have touched and moved his heart with it, as he feels his sins through the law, that he comes before God and offers this prayer, that he certainly believes and holds he has heard from the Word of God, that God will forgive sins and be merciful, that is, turn away from them his wrath and eternal death for the sake of his Son, the promised Messiah, such faith united and bound together in this prayer these two contrary elements.

29. Now, this preaching the Gospel is indeed heard by many, and it appears an easy matter to say this; but it is not as common as men think, that everyone knows it; and one better understands how difficult it is, than the few who study and exercise themselves in it, that they also might believe and pray like the publican. The reason of this is, because the pious rogue and hypocrite, the Pharisee, is still within us, who hinders and prevents us from thus uniting them.

*(Sermons of Martin Luther, Vol IV. Trans.: John Nickolas Lencker. Baker, 2000. pp. 348-369.)*

*As we noted in the introductory passage, Jesus has idolatrous pride in his bomb sights today. What is the idolatrous trust of self which we see today? Luther thought buying an indulgence was trusting oneself and one's own resources when it came to the realm of the spiritual economy. That was one of his chief arguments against the practice. It produced lazy, self-confident Christians instead of true penitence.*

- 1. We see this self-trust in the contempt/loathing/judgmental behaviors expressed to others who do not meet our moral code. The Christian believes that my sins are just as bad as another. Indeed, Paul says he is the worst of all sinners. God's love is shown to all the world. When we make the distinctions which would suggest that God loves some more than others, we are trusting that we have qualified for the "beloved" category. This is just spiritual pride. We love to deflect attention away from this by putting a label on the other person which allows us to deny our problems and say that I have not descended to that level of depravity.*
- 2. It could be when I point to my own piety and good works and think that this has somehow earned some points with God. This sounds like a good straw-man today, however. Do we*

*really see folks like this in our parishes? Or do we see some who haughtily look down on those outside and trust in the fact that they got their catechism right or at least have confessed faith, accepted Jesus, or something along those lines and that means we won't be joining those folks on the down escalator at the end of time. Do we trust our Lutheran label more than Christ?*

- 3. Very few are thinking that God is rewarding them for good works such as giving money, going to church, or something like that. But do we have a spiritual pride which insists on our "worminess" and will not actually accept the gracious love of Christ shown to me? Do we as preachers get nervous when someone compliments us on our sermon? Does it make us uncomfortable hear someone say we did a good job. Are we too quick to point to our weakness and forget to point to Christ's strength through us? Is this a form of trusting in our penitence? Is this what we imagine makes us acceptable to God?*
- 4. Do we sometimes think that we are theologically right and do we trust in our rectitude over against the "Baptists" or another group? Lutheranism is a theological and sometimes too intellectual of a movement. Do we trust that our theology is right?*
- 5. A great way to gauge what we or others think about this is to listen carefully as we confront death at a funeral. What do we say about this person? We have a human tendency to say they were good, but we really need to say that Jesus was good to this person, forgiving them, loving them, and today, as they have died, keeping the promise made in baptism.*

*I am increasingly aware of the way that the Gospels "use" children in their presentation of Jesus. I did a little survey of this in the Gospels and without fail, when these stories of Jesus holding or focusing on a child are presented, they come right after a very strong statement of the Law, such as Mark 10 or Matthew 19. Jesus' reception of children, his care for them, his words about them, suggest that somehow we are to be "child-like." But here I also see Satan's work. He has redefined childhood in our culture for this very reason, to spoil our reading of these precious texts.*

*Since Victorian times, we have defined children as innocent, without sin, until an age of accountability, usually around the age of 7-12. But the ancients did not see children that way, through a moralizing lens. I too can say that my infant is not really morally culpable for making me get up in the middle of the night, but that midnight shuffle to calm a crying infant is still miserable to do. Rather than focus on their moral innocence, the ancients focused on a child's helpless state. In the eyes of folks in the ancient world children were weak and helpless, without the ability to solve their own problems, feed themselves, hold a job, or own property. The rites of adulthood in the ancient world were far more significant for the individual than they are today, but still we start to account a person responsible and grown up when we give them a license to drive a car, let them vote, let them drink, and finally allow them to rent a car at the age of 25. In the ancient world the rite of becoming a man meant that you were now able to own property, marry, and otherwise govern your own affairs. In the ancient Jewish culture the final rite of*

*manhood did not happen until you were 30 – that is why Jesus does not start preaching until he reaches that milestone.*

*Jesus says we must be like children, helpless, dependent, without the ability to solve our own problems and hanging on the good care of another. In the words immediately before he receives these children, Jesus always addresses the relentless reality of our own sinfulness. He describes people who are trapped, helpless before the horror of what sin has done to us, people who are incapable of extricating themselves. Who can read this parable of the Pharisee and the Publican and admit that “I have always been like that Publican!”? Who can say such a thing with honesty? No one can. He has told this parable to make Pharisees of us all!*

*Jesus addresses here the spiritual pride which infects Christians of every age. This is the elder brother (Parable of the Prodigal) mentality which wants to see that I have somehow arrived into this right relationship with God and immediately wants to look down my nose at the guy whose I consider to be beyond the pale. But as we see in the first reading, being the elder brother is far more dangerous than simply being cast as a judgmental prig standing outside the door of the father’s party for the prodigal. That brother wanted his younger, foolish brother to stay “dead” and could not celebrate his “resurrection” to us the father’s words. Cain did not simply wish his younger brother dead. He killed him.*

*We err if we think that this parable is given to us with the idea that Jesus is therapeutically treating us. He is not giving us good advice to follow so we can avoid the scourge of spiritual pride and exercise some Godly humility. Jesus is not doing that. He is crushing us, he is killing us, so that he can make us alive again. These words are not words which are designed to be good advice. These words are the crushing hammer of God’s Word, he is here the rock that crushes the sinners.*

*If you believe that, it will affect the way you preach this. The preacher is not gently chiding folks and encouraging them to do better tomorrow. This is not the sermon of a moral optimist who thinks people are basically good, but have simply strayed from the childhood innocence. This sermon is about the brokenness of humanity, the fact that no matter how hard I try, I continually find myself patting myself on the back after every success and really hoping someone, especially God, notices what a good boy I am. Jesus speaks these words to me.*

*The preacher may also, if it is in certain situations, want to preach infant baptism this day. It is a divisive practice in North America. There is a fair amount of the protestant world which considers this practice to be unbiblical and fundamentally a popish mistake. Yet Luke is careful to tell us that these are infants who are brought to Jesus. The word he uses indicates a child who cannot yet speak “brephes.” Children learn to speak about 20-24 months, usually, sometimes earlier. We think it is a problem if they are not speaking by 2. Those were little children Jesus was putting his hands on, not the obedient second graders often depicted in the cheesy Sunday School art.*

*Notice that Jesus does not say, “These are innocents, they have no need of my touch.” Rather he says, “let them come” and then he blesses them. They need his blessing as much as the adults. In fact, he then goes on to say that the adult needs the same blessing he has given them. Is not the universal blessing the very faith by which he saves us?*

*If you want to read a marvelous telling of this, I recommend to you the second novella found in the “Hammer of God” by Bo Giertz and published by Augsburg/Fortress. In that passage, Fridfeldt, the young pastor, is toying with abandoning infant baptism and being re-baptized himself. The inner conflict and argumentation which takes place in that section is worthy of your reading. It is all well done, an easy read, and not done in a sense that he wants to bash anyone, but he wants to hold up the comfort and the wonder of God’s love for all people expressed in baptism.*

**Sermon Idea:** “God’s own child, I gladly say it...” (That the hearer would be convicted by God’s Word that he/she is completely in the grip of sin’s power, and his/her only hope is Christ’s gracious help, freely given us in baptismal regeneration, sacramental presence, and Christ’s good work through the Spirit.)

If you have not yet taught your people the baptismal hymn from which the title of this sermon is taken, this would be a great Sunday to do it. I taught my “gospel tune lovin” bunch this song in my last parish and they really came to like it, even though it is nothing of the sort of music they usually preferred.

If you don’t have the musical ability to teach them to sing it in your congregation, it is certainly worthy of having them intersect with the words of this poem.

This sermon really wants all the hearers to be sitting on Jesus lap by the end of this message. Jesus says that we must receive the kingdom of heaven this way, and you are simply agreeing with that. We must be one of those children on his lap. But that means we must face up to something. Like a helpless child, I cannot beat back my own sinfulness. This is not the sermon for a moral optimist who thinks that if we try a little harder we can make real progress. This is a law and gospel hammer and tongs approach to life. The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector/Publican is designed to crush us with its depiction of our own sinful pride. It is the very man whom we despise who leaves justified, not the self-righteous prig who is convinced that his catechism is the right one and that his church is the right one, and that his faith is the saving one. The moment we get something right, we immediately want to turn around and see if someone noticed it. I am not against going to church, confessing that I am a poor, miserable sinner, or putting an offering in the plate, but we are not given points with God for doing this. In the real analysis, they don’t really matter.

It is not a comfortable sermon for the institution that way. Institutions are all about setting up boundaries which acknowledge the borders between the saved and unsaved. But this sermon is about smashing some of those comfortable things. Jesus is upsetting the institutional apple cart here and this sermon should have an edge to it which makes some folks uncomfortable. The things they are relying upon may not be as stable as they think they are. God is not asking which denomination you attend, nor is he asking how well you have managed to cope with sin or

control your impulses. He is looking for that faith which stretches out its hands to Jesus as he picks you up from the mire of sin and death you have made for yourself, which every human being has made for him or herself since Adam and Eve and Cain.

We noticed some strong affinity here with the Old Testament lesson in this reading. Who is my brother we might ask. The Pharisee can see the Publican/Tax Collector only with contempt.

This text is really good at reminding us that this is not about me, it is about God. God saves us from both our vices and our virtues – I must be this child. He doesn't care what I got right or wrong. The sins and guilt are one sort of tyranny that he set me free from in the Reformation. But he also set me free from the tyranny of my good works, the idea that I needed to do something which God would honor, which God would respond to. God's love is freely given to his children, he does not count the sins or the good deeds, but loves with his bottomless and beautiful love.

The tax collector (publican) is really out of style today. He beats his breast, expresses his sorrow. We might just suggest therapy for this fellow, but Jesus commends him. He is a child.

This sermon destroys a couple of really problematic behaviors in the church.

- a. The feeling of total inadequacy which often cripples service. God does not need me to be good at what I do. He makes us adequate and empowers our deeds because he gives.
- b. The feeling of contempt for the people outside the Church. We are no better or worse than they are. But we are all beloved by God.
- c. The weariness and lethargy which would focus my attention on my own paucity of resources. This idea puts us into a relationship of God which revolves around him and which draws our energy/strength from God, not from our own abilities/strengths/wisdom.

Some ideas for starting this off – how do we feel in the presence of someone who is better at something than we are? What do we do in that situation? What do we do when it is clear we are better at something than someone else? What does Sunday afternoon football tell us to do in that situation? (gloating?)