Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 12  (Proper 6)

Last Sunday’s readings focused us on the person of Christ and his power over death. We noted that Jesus did not pray to raise the young man, he just started talking to the corpse and the young man answered. God has that sort of power because God is not subject to death. When the Lord of Life spoke, death also had to obey and render up its captives. God did it in the Old Testament and in the New, but in the New he bore the name Jesus.

Today we again come to one of those truths that Christians confess. Jesus is the answer to problems that often plague us the most, the real problems we have with other people and they have with us. Jesus forgives sins. Last week we saw him looking compassionately on the plight of the poor widows. This week, he has his gaze firmly fixed on the broken relationships which afflict every life.

To what extent do we even look to Jesus for solutions to this sort of a problem? Culturally forgiveness has largely fallen off the map. Our litigious society trusts no one and in turn is met with suspicion at every corner. Our interpersonal relationships are largely driven by securing ourselves. Bureaucracies cannot create an adequate paper trail for forgiveness and hence it really doesn’t exist in a bureaucratic world.

But Jesus is the forgiver of sins and enjoins us to be a people who forgive sins. Yet, I find that many Christians who speak approvingly of forgiveness cannot tell you what it is or what actually happens when they forgive someone. They cannot describe it or even tell you how to do it. I have included an essay with these notes which I pray will be helpful.

The preacher who is attracted to the theme of forgiveness, and who could not be, will do well to keep in mind the epistle reading today. Paul is walking in the sacred heart of Christianity and arguing for its truth. Consider his words carefully as they will be important for what you say. Forgiveness belongs to the cross and that cross is utter foolishness to the world. We preach Christ crucified. He has risen to live in me and that empowers my forgiveness. I cannot submit that truth to a microscope or some laboratory analysis. It is believed but that makes it no less real.

The preacher of forgiveness in the life of the congregation might be a little discouraged by what he sees if he takes a sober look at Christianity today. We are not that good at forgiveness. But he also must preach in hope. For Christ has not abandoned his church and Christ has in the past done amazing things with miserable people and will do so again.

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us Your gifts of faith, hope, and love that we may receive the forgiveness You have promised and love what You have commanded; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
This prayer occasioned considerable discussion three years ago. We wondered about the “that” after faith, hope, and love. It seems to imply that the increase of those three somehow make the reception of forgiveness possible. But is that so? Faith as small as a mustard seed can do great things because God is working through it. Do we understand the “that” to be akin to an “as” which locates this growth within the reception of this forgiveness? Does the forgiveness effect the growth? Or does this mean that we might better receive the forgiveness, like a radio with a taller antenna can pull in a more subtle signal from a distant station?

Does the categorization of faith, hope, and love as a gift mean that the reception of forgiveness and these other gifts are all of a piece? Are they all together one thing? Does the faith, hope, and love get summarized here as “forgiveness”?

How do we understand the word “receive”? Is this an active role of the receiver? Or is this a passive reception? What sort of a reception is this?

Almighty and everlasting: God simply never runs out of strength and there is no way to wear him down. His steadfast love for us does not erode, grow weary, or otherwise fall short. He lasts forever. The bottom of a pair of my old boots used to say “Everlast” on the sole. It was a lie. They wore out. God does not lie.

We pray this God increases in us his gifts of faith, hope, and love so we may receive forgiveness. We need faith to be forgiven and be forgivers. Faith is the God-made relationship empowered by the Spirit which connects us to Jesus, especially the crucified and risen Christ who has died for our sins. Faith is essential to forgiveness. Faith looks at the sinner and the wrong and says that Jesus died for that.

Hope is the expectation that God will do something. We tend to see hope as a weak or flimsy sort of a thing. “I hope you can come out for a visit,” usually means that I am not expecting you to. But in the Biblical vocabulary Hope is much stronger. “I hope in God” does not mean that I am not sure of him, it only means that I have not seen it yet, but I am sure that it will happen. Hope is a strong expectation in the biblical vocabulary. In forgiveness language, we expect that God will back up our words. When I forgive a sin, God has said it is forgiven in heaven too. I look forward to the day when I will get to see that reality. What is more, I am expecting that God will create something new and better in place of the broken relationship which I grieve to see in the hurt, both in terms of my relationship with God when he forgives me, and in the relationship with my neighbor when I forgive one of them. I expect to see something different, better, more beautiful, or I won’t forgive. I need hope to be forgiven and to forgive. This is very different than understanding. Understanding is dismal. It doesn’t look for something better, it just looks at the sinner and the wrong he/she has done and admits that I would have likely done the same in that situation. It doesn’t expect anything of God in this situation. It just accepts and tolerates the problem.
Love is also essential to that forgiveness, either received or given. God’s love, not mine. I am a conduit for God’s love to my neighbor. It passes through me and is expressed in word and deed, perhaps nowhere more beautifully than in the forgiveness of another human being. It is not me ginning up the love for the stinker, it is God’s great gift working in me. God’s love is always cruciform. I can love with His love. I can say about any sin, no matter how bad, that Jesus died for that. This love is not really about my feelings; although, they will come along for the ride, don’t worry, and God also desires my feelings to be in congruity with my words. But this is first and foremost about words and deeds. God’s love is an action, a word said, a deed done.

Having received the forgiveness, the forgiveness of my sins and the forgiveness which I now can speak to another, I pray that I may love what he has commanded. We have often had the discussion about whether this is a prayer to love the things God has commanded me to love, say my neighbor or whether this is the love the commandments themselves and hence do them out of a sanctified and beautiful spirit. You can run either way with this.

II Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-14 You can see why they might have chopped out the missing verses, not entirely appropriate for Sunday services, but I have left it in for our consideration.

26 When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she lamented over her husband. 27 And when the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD. And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. 2 The rich man had very many flocks and herds, 3 but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. 4 Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.” 5 Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, 6 and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

7 Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. 8 And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. 9 Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. 10 Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have
despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’ 11 Thus says the LORD, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. 12 For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.’” 13 David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.” And Nathan said to David, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die.” 14 Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child who is born to you shall die.” 15 Then Nathan went to his house.

This is a beloved and well known passage. David has broken most of the commandments, grossly, by this point. He is a royal stinker, literally. He has coveted, he has lied, he has stolen, he has committed adultery, he has murdered. He has put his own pleasure and security above God and his sacred duty as king.

David’s actions almost seem cliché or quaint to us, but that is only because we are so familiar with politicians and people of power practicing the cover-up. He is trying to preserve his reputation and perhaps hers, but I doubt he was as concerned for her feelings when he gave the order to have her husband killed. Today, we are inundated with images and an acceptance of immorality. Most would shrug about the infidelity of a president. Some today probably are longing for the good old days when the nation was embroiled in something so simple as Monica-gate. But is our nonchalance about matters sexual really a sign of health? How many weddings have you attended lately where the bride and the groom actually had different addresses before they got married? Would a young woman in our congregations feel any shame if she came to her wedding day 7 months pregnant? Would a young man who fathered a child be respected by his peers or merely pitied for the financial obligations of paternity? Would any suggest to him that he had sinned? Would he be able to hear that and bear it?

Christians have a poor reputation for speaking harshly about homosexuality, but are we not far too tolerant of the heterosexual sins in our own midst? Even within the Missouri Synod too often a Pastor has had an affair, removed from the congregation but then suddenly pops up in another congregation, sometimes barely a circuit away. Does “a husband of one wife” really have an escape clause that I am missing here? If we want the world to hear us when we speak of the sins Paul rails against in Romans 1-2, we must first point that finger inward at ourselves. But we cannot bear to. When the prophets come and speak, we wriggle like worms in the bottom of the fisherman’s can. If it speaks to closely to our hearts, American Christians simply run away, to a more congenial setting where our sins can be tolerated and the folks are more “accepting.”

But unless the sin is brought to light and the sinner sees it for what it is, there can be no forgiveness. The prophet has not come to smash David and leave him dead upon the floor. God could have accomplished that far more efficiently. Lightning bolts from heaven have a problem in that they have this finality about them. God prefers a prophet. Nathan speaks harshly, but he does so in order to forgive the sinner. His words are spoken to awaken David, to open his eyes to
his own sin so that he may see the forgiveness of God as well. It is very interesting to me that Nathan knows that God has forgiven this, he has those words at the ready when David admits his guilt. He can do so because he knows that the mercy of God is great for sinners. How do you suppose he figured that out? Was it because he was first a recipient of that mercy? That is all I can figure out.

For preachers, this is one of the great examples of effective preaching. Notice how he hooks David. This is incredibly effective. By getting David to agree that the rich man in the parable is an evil lout, the “you are the man…” becomes the hammer blow that will break David’s prideful duplicity.

It may be, and the text does not say it, but that never stopped a preacher from thinking it, that David was feeling this guilt already in his heart. When Nathan surfaced this sin it may well be that David was simply relieved, almost glad that the lies and the cover-up were over. Be careful, the text does not say this. What is more, it can lead one down a path of therapy gospel – the sin of David was real, the guilt was not just a psychological phenomenon. He very much needed God’s forgiveness in a legal sense.

Every preacher dreams of pulling one of these off. He catches David in his own wrath and indignation. He tells a little story about a terrible deed and David falls for it hook line and sinker. He rises up in wrath against the rich man only to discover that the object of his wrath is himself? If you ever get someone to do this, you have them, it is truly effective, but hard to do. I saw a marvelous dramatic presentation at a national youth gathering that did this so effectively one year. They had a guy dressed up like Jesus who said all the right things, and all the kids were cheering for him, but then it came out that his righteous words of condemnation were actually quite judgmental, the real Jesus character came out and showed him to be Satan. I remember my group sitting there stunned when this happened.

I subscribe to a little email feed called “News of the Weird” mostly to come up with annoying items for my family. But this one seemed especially poignant today and perhaps appropriate.

Ironies:

According to court records cited by The Washington Post in April, Rene Fernandez, 45, will plead guilty to one count of a DUI-caused injury in connection with a 2009 traffic accident in Montgomery County, Md., that severely injured a retired county judge and his wife, both in their 80s. Fernandez and the judge, Edwin Collier, had met previously, in 1998, when Judge Collier pronounced sentence on Fernandez for DUI. At that time, Judge Collier released Fernandez on probation, even though Fernandez had been arrested for DUI twice in the previous three months. [Washington Post, 4-10-10, 4-14-10] Downloaded from http://www.newsoftheweird.com/archive/index.html (6.6.2010)
What I find so interesting about this little piece is that I find it so easy to be judgmental about both of the principle characters in this story. Yet, am I really that different? I have been the fool of the judge who should have locked her up but let the sinner off the hook. I have been the weeping penitent who with good intentions promised I would never do it again and failed to keep that promise. I have been bitten by the very act of kindness and mercy which I have erroneously shown. I have returned to harm the very people who have been the ones who have shown mercy to me. This is a story about me, so why do read it ironically and find some perverse satisfaction in it? Do I think of the poor judge’s wife who was simply sitting in the seat by her husband?

It is also worth noting that consequences remain. The girl who is forgiven for her fornication may still be pregnant. The boy’s college dreams may have to be seriously altered as he now must shoulder the responsibilities of parenthood. But even in these consequences we are not beyond the blessings which God would give us. God did bless David and Bathsheba’s marriage, though it had sinful beginnings. Forgiveness does mean that God also does not deal with us as our past deserves, but in light of Christ’s cross. Solomon will be born to them. Bathsheba will be depicted as faithful and part of David’s life until its end.

The Psalm for the day bears special mention. It is credited to David and makes for a poignant ending to a sermon if you are considering this. Have the congregation read it with you, aloud.

The Old Testament regularly calls David the best king the nation ever had, a man after God’s own heart. It was not his moral rectitude which made him so great, it was the fact that he knew where to bring his junk, his sins.

What is the message for our folks in this? God forgives even our whoppers? David was a dirty rotten scoundrel, and God confronted him, loved him, and forgave the penitent David.

Or is the story here really the God who is anxious to forgive us, reaches out to us. No matter what we have done. While David’s sin is great, I know my sins so much better than this one episode of David, and I can take comfort from the fact that God reaches out to the David’s of this world, even me.

Is this a first commandment issue? Is David really trying to take God’s place? Does God reassert his proper place in David’s life through his gracious love of foolish David. Where Ahab did the same things that David did, when confronted with his sins, David returned to God. Lots of names can come to mind today, a number of televangelists have spectacularly fallen and returned to God, so is Chuck Colson, and Father ______ of the local diocese. Can we really look at any of these folks and say that they are forgiven saints of God, despite their sins? God did for David and that says a whole lot about God, the same God who is speaking through the words of forgiveness that I speak on Sunday morning.

This text would also make an excellent place to talk two kingdom theology. If you want to know more about that, I commend you to the Concordia, Nebraska website as they have rather adopted this issue of two kingdom theology.
If you want to try to recapture the idea of sin, which has largely been lost in this culture, you might also try “Loaded Words: Freeing 12 Hard Bible Words from their Baggage”

Psalm 32:1-7

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
2 Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

3 For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

5 I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah

6 Therefore let everyone who is godly
offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found;
surely in the rush of great waters,
they shall not reach him.
7 You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah

This beautiful psalm takes the reader through the emotional states of forgiveness. The preacher may want to use it as an outline for a sermon.

Galatians 2:15-21: 3:10-14 I have included the missing section, which is so important to the passage but which we hear on another Sunday, so we miss it here.

15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.
But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

This is Paul at some of his most significant and it is pretty dense stuff. If you are doing the Galatians series we talked about, this is the heart of the message and Paul’s argument to the Galatians. Exercise caution and care here. There is another element which we will get next week. The freedom which Paul describes today quickly becomes a license and that is no freedom, and yet the endeavor to set up a system which would prevent the license is not really free, is not really freedom. There are pitfalls on either side of this issue.

Here is an outline of what Paul says in this section:

1. Thesis statement (vss 15-16) Paul states the central element of the whole book: We are made right with God through faith, not works.
2. **An objection anticipated (vss 17-18)** If I am saved by faith, does Christ just not care about sin? Do we really think he is glorified by sin?

3. **Objection answered (vss 19-21)** Christ does care about my broken life, in fact his action is the best way to make a real change in a sinful life – he lives in me, rendering my life truly holy.

4. **The first argument in support of the thesis – experience (vss 1-5)** You did not receive the Holy Spirit after you did something, but when you heard and believed. God did not wait for circumcision to pour out His Spirit.

5. **Congruence with Torah (vss 6-9)** This is not a departure from Judaism, but reflects a very careful reading of the Torah. (remember – the charge the Judaizers are lodging against Paul is that he has changed something)

6. **The second argument in support of thesis – logical (vss 10-14)** The law is a brutal taskmaster, it requires perfection, not merely getting close or closer to fulfilling it. The truly “right with God” human does not get there through doing it but through this mechanism of faith. The one who trusts his own works is cursed – the Torah says so. Jesus took that curse for us.

While the Epistle readings are not chosen to coincide with the Gospel, on this occasion they really do hang together as they speak of forgiveness. Paul connects the dots for us here and makes sense of the passionate worship of the woman in the Gospel and the inexplicable love God has for the stinker David. It is not the law, the doing of deeds that makes us right with God, it is the sacrifice of Christ. There is no sin larger than the forgiveness of Christ on the cross. There is no bad or evil thing in the world for which we cannot honestly say “Christ died for that.”

I firmly believe that all the attempts to fix my problems or the problems which afflict congregations based on sociology or anthropology or marketing techniques, or anything else misses the point. We need to hear the Law of God really condemn us so that the Gospel can raise us from death, from real death. That is God’s good work in our lives. As Bonaventura once said, “until I am nothing, God makes nothing of me.”

The passionate love of Christ which built the cathedrals in Bonaventura’s day, which founded universities, which started organizations like Lutheran World Relief, and which founded hospitals around the world is not going to be found in a spiritual gifts inventory or a reorganization of the governance structures of the synod or my congregation. That will only come when Christ sits at my table and catches me in his parable. There is nothing I can do to fix whatever ails me or my congregation unless he is empowering it all.

Now, once Christ has caught and forgiven me. Then there is much to do. The sinner forgiven does indeed live by faith. I really think the sermon is found in that second point which Paul’s makes as he answers the objection to the thesis. We don’t really trust that God’s love, and not rules, empower the really virtuous and holy life. We think God needs a little help to do that, some
discipline, some guilt, something which will curb my sinful appetite. But God says his love is enough. The woman in our Gospel lesson today does worship, David’s marriage is indeed blessed, Paul calls gentiles to a righteousness that flows from that faith, far better than the righteousness which flows from the law. This righteousness is established by Christ and empowered by the Spirit and both desires and does the right thing. It is not just a platitude which Paul offers up here: Christ really does live through me, and he is potent and gets much done. He is gracious and gentle, but also powerful and filled with love for all.

This text powerfully addresses the state of who we are in Christ. It is the very center of the Christian message. I really believe that the Bible gets this right for us when it repeats it over and over again in stories. This is almost more than a single sermon can carry, and the best way for that sermon to carry it is through the vehicle of story.

Luke 7:36-8:3  (Jesus feet are anointed by the sinful woman)

36 One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. 37 And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, 38 and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.” 40 And Jesus answering said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” And he answered, “Say it, Teacher.”

41 “A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?” 43 Simon answered, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” And he said to him, “You have judged rightly.” 44 Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” 48 And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” 49 Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” 50 And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been
healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³ and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

The story of David and Bathsheba are a beautiful compliment to the story of Jesus at the house of Simon the Pharisee.

Notice the woman comes and treats Jesus feet. This was the action actually of one of the lowest slaves in the house. She herself is not likely a slave, not if she has bought an alabaster jar of costly ointment to pour on Jesus' feet. She is a person of some means anyway. Was she a prostitute or someone like that? Who knows? We don't. Her actions, however speak loudly. She weeps and washes his feet with her tears. Jesus will make a bold statement when he washes the disciples feet and John the Baptist will say that he is not even worthy to untie the laces of Jesus sandal (I have read that this was a deed considered so low that a Rabbi could not ask a disciple to do it, although I think a supervising pastor could make a vicar do it. 😊)

Her care for Jesus feet can only be described here as sensuous; this is almost an erotic scene. The mystics of the medieval period will use this scene to speak of their rapturous love for Christ and because this woman elsewhere is described as Mary Magdalene, this may be why there are many cathedrals and churches in the Roman Catholic tradition which are named for her including the Cathedral in Salt Lake City. Her worship of Christ is obviously motivated by a passion. (I am not suggesting that Dan Brown in the D’Vinci Code was correct, but we do not do ourselves any favor by ignoring what the text actually does say either.)

What drives this passion? It is not eros, but something different, something more potent even than erotic passion. It is forgiveness itself which is born of Agape, the sacrificial and beautiful love which God has for people, despite their sins. She is not attracted to Christ out of some lust for him, but out of the incredible gratitude which a sinner feels toward the forgiver. We like to think that eros and agape are different things. The scholarship of the twentieth century which brought us to that point has been questioned of late. Benedict XVI wrote his first encyclical on love and rather smashed the whole idea. Love is love, he said.

Have you ever really forgiven someone or been really forgiven? It opens a floodgate of love. This is the passion upon which the Christian church has been built for two millennia and its absence is the reason that so many of our parishes in North America are stale, stagnant, and declining. We have forgotten what we are doing there, and forgetting that love of God for sinners, we have turned it into a social club that bickers a lot. How do I know this? When someone’s feelings get hurt in our parishes what do we see? Do they bear grudges and stop talking to one another? Do they bottle it up inside until the next voters meeting? Do they just run away and refuse to deal with the problem? Do they forgive? I honestly believe that if people found forgiveness at our parishes, in their mouths at communion, in their ears, in the hugs and the handshakes, there is nothing we could do to keep them from coming. We could sing bad hymns off tune and they would still come. But when we take that essential ingredient away from
their relationship to the congregation, we too often are left trying to compete with soccer for the kids, the party plans for the weekend, catching up on our Game of Thrones reruns, etc. All the small group ministry, relevant youth groups, praise bands, and contemporary music we offer will not fill that void.

Jesus hooks Simon just like Nathan hooks David. A parable is a powerful tool to do this. I wonder how we might do this today. Which man loves more? He who is forgiven little, loves little. The answer is pretty obvious and the judgment is also a hammer blow. The woman’s incredible act of worship is the result of being forgiven for much. Simon’s inhospitable reception of Christ is not because he does not have many sins to be forgiven, but he won’t acknowledge them and so they stand there, trying to be justified on their own merits, balanced out by his good deeds, understood by the circumstances, fouling the water of his life and the hospitality of his home. Does that hit us as well? Simon’s stand-offish behavior suggests that he was somewhat conflicted about having this Jesus in his house.

Jesus tells Simon, us and this woman the obvious truth. Her sins are forgiven, but she already knew that. It was Simon who needed to hear it and he cannot. So Jesus pushes another button for the Pharisees in the room. It was not her works that saved her, but her relationship with God in which she was helpless and he was the helper, the savior. “Your faith has saved you.” There is a pile of Gospel there for the unpacking. Have fun with that one.

The latter part of this text is really an interesting inclusion. It is actually in the Revised Common Lectionary and I believe with an agenda. I am surprised that our LCMS committee left it but am glad that they did. Jesus was apparently not so picky about his companions as the Pharisees. Amazingly, he also seems to have associated even with women. No self-respecting Rabbi would do so, but then again, Jesus was no self-respecting Rabbi who had to obey the rules of social convention. He was/is the Son of God and his love is bigger than all our sins and synodical convention resolutions. This is a bit of minefield here and you may not be aware of what is going on. It is clear that Luke wants us to read that there were Disciples who were women. That is revolutionary in the first century when almost no women were educated. They funded his ministry, and they seemed to have held leadership positions within it. Is this an argument for women’s ordination? I am not going to go that far, but it is a reality which needs to be considered in the context of our ongoing discussions of women’s ordination. The Creator’s Tapestry, the recent document of our Synod, simply doesn’t wrestle with these passages. It needed too and we lost an opportunity there.

For Luke’s audience this might have been really important. It appears that many of the earliest converts to Christianity were women. (See the story of Lydia we read in Acts a few weeks ago.) Many of these women were wealthy. It appears that the houses which contained the earliest congregations were all under the control of these women. (Again, see Lydia and I Corinthians which says that people from “Cloe’s house” came to see him.) Luke seems to be telling these women, by embedding these comments about Jesus’ interaction with women, that their posture of
listening to Christ and supporting his work has precedent. What they experience in the Christian church has its roots in the experiences of the first disciples who included women who also supported him in his work. Contrary to those who suggest that they are stepping out of the traditional boundaries set for them by the first century society, listening and supportive women are found right there in the pages of the Jesus story.

Law and Gospel

1. I have really made something of a mess of my life. I may not have descended to the depths of David’s problems, but there is a bitter trail which I have left behind me, relationships broken and neglected, arguments unresolved, promises broken, and expectations unmet. But Jesus has come to deal with my failure. His death and resurrection are because I have been such a failure.

2. But Jesus’ forgiveness has not taken away the consequences of my sins. There are still people who loathe me. There are some relationships which I cannot seem to mend. I may bear other consequences: a job lost, a child, alimony payments, or a Jacobean limp, who knows what. Jesus has a way, without taking them away, of turning these things into blessings for me. David was given Bathsheba and from her received Solomon.

3. Yet, even though this is true, my heart often remains cold and unfeeling toward Jesus. I know I am supposed to go to Church and sing these songs and say these words, but I find myself going through the motions. I look at the fellow next to me, or the plan of the other guy and I cannot help but hate him and his idea. I will sabotage this whole thing if I can. Jesus plants something else into my heart. The woman in the Gospel lesson who washes his feet with her tears has given up all her pride because Jesus has called from her passionate and joyful worship. She stoops to wash his feet, slaves’ work, with her own tears, drying them with her hair, because he has loved her with God’s unstinting love. Her sins are forgotten, her place as a daughter of God has been restored.

4. But that is her, what about me? I read this and recoil at the thought of washing dusty feet? With Simon I am repelled at this image, especially if you put me into it. But Jesus does not crush him as he deserved, instead he shows him his sin that he might forgive him too and draw out of him that save beautiful love. Yes, I might even be able to forgive that loathsome fool with whom I work or the one whom once I loved but now whose vicious words have left a scar deep in my heart. Can you imagine how hard it was for Bathsheba to love David after all he did to her? She did, but she did not love him because of any forgiveness she ginned up in her heart, but out of a love which God planted there. Even nasty old Pharisees like Simon can come to love with his love.

5. This all sounds good in theory, but in practice? Come on! Human beings need some discipline, someone to goad and pull them into line. This cannot be a genuine plan for
dealing with sinful humanity. Teddy Roosevelt said speak softly but carry a big stick. We need to preach the gospel, but always have a big stick, or at least God does. But Paul asserts for us that this really is it. The real righteousness, the real holiness is found only in the heart responding to God’s love. The deed done in fulfillment of the obligation to the law is cursed. Yes, even my worship, my alms, my “gift” put into the plate, if it is an attempt to buy God’s love, it is accursed. But Christ living in me actually does so much more than the Law could ever accomplish. He has united himself with me and empowers a holiness and righteousness which transcends my wildest imagination.

Sermon Ideas

1. Forgiven to Forgive (That the hearer would believe that God has freely and fully forgiven all his/her sins thus empowering him/her to be an authentic, potent, effective forgiver of sins.)

Illustration: The David and Bathsheba story and the account of Jesus with Simon are such great stories, we might simply want to tell them both as illustrations of the points, but is there another? We referenced the Amish community which forgave the murder of the school girls. They actually set up a scholarship fund for the children of that man. The Marshal plan after WWII. Jesus on the cross and Stephen in Acts 7 both forgave the men who were killing them.

Who are the scoundrels today? Bernie Maddoff, perhaps any executive for BP. If you live in certain communities, you could point to a politician or two, some hate G. W. Bush. Others are equally convinced that Obama is destroying the constitution. The Roman Catholic pedophile priests, or any clergy who have betrayed the trust of a congregation and its most vulnerable people. How do we portray this woman? Who is a “sinner” in our eyes, someone who might not be worthy to touch Christ, whose presence would defile even the holy one of God. Good heavens, what if a Calvinist came to the table!? Too often that is portrayed as sullying the sacrament. It is interesting that Luke doesn’t tell us what sort of sin this woman committed. What if she was dating a Roman soldier? Ever since the Victorian period, we have usually supplied a sexual sin for these women, but other times and cultures would have put different moral content into the term.

See the opening essay for much of the content here. The preacher will want to focus on Simon first here. He has a problem with this woman who washes Jesus’ feet with her tears. If Jesus was really the sort of prophet he claimed to be, he would know what sort of a woman she really is.

But Jesus is that sort of prophet and more. He knows just what sort of a woman she is, and he knows just what sort of a man Simon is, and he loves them both, the gross sinner and the judgmental jerk. Somewhere in that picture we will find ourselves. If we have
ever thought that we were too icky for heaven, we can feel like that woman in the story today, the incredible relief of God’s love has opened our hearts, our lips and our minds to worship and rejoice.

There are two characters in this story, both of them want the love of God. Simon however, wants love which extends only to him, and not others. The woman only sees that God has loved her and that overflows into a lavish act of worship. God has accepted us for who we are, which empowers us to accept the other for who they are. God will work the details out, the sins are his, not mine to deal with. As David said, “I have sinned against God.” Notice, he had murdered a man, committed adultery with his wife, lied to a whole host of people, but he admits that his sin was against God. God gives us a new set of eyes today which let us see all that sin of the other as a problem which God has to work out. It is her faith, that holy relationship which God created, which has saved this woman. She believes that God is the solution to her dilemma which she simply does not have.

But more likely we find ourselves looking more like hapless and loveless Simon. He would put a limit on God’s love, it reaches as far as he is, but not all the way to that one. Praise God he does not listen to Simon. He loves with unstinting and boundless love. And so Jesus would even reach out to him, with the parable which is told for his sake, with the words of admonition which are intended to put him into the same “sinner” category as the woman, so that he might kneel at her side worship Christ with the same passionate love and affection which enough tears to her eyes that she can wash his feet.

How will we communicate that both Simon and the woman have had the totality of their debt paid? Both of them had a serious God problem, a debt which they could not pay, which God has paid in full, for both of them. Jesus uses an economic/banking metaphor here. Simon has been a lousy host, a serious sin in the ancient world.

We are humbled by Christ’s words today so that we too may see this woman and all people differently. Of all of God’s creation that day, she got it right, despite her past. God would give us new eyes with which to see our neighbors and friends and even our enemies. He has forgiven them, promised new life, and filled our hearts with a love which forgives, yes, truly forgives. The preacher may well want to simply take the time to talk his congregation through the whole process of forgiveness and just how that works. Especially focus on the idea that forgiveness is really God’s forgiveness for me simply working out in the relationships in which I live.

2. Worship with Passion (That the hearer would confess the sin of bloodless worship and all that comes from that, and being forgiven, be able to worship God with generous joy.)
This sermon would see the hearer really in the position of the woman in the Gospel story, but also of David who sings the Psalm for today. Try this in a simple Law/Gospel dynamic:

Our love for Christ is often without passion, our service to him is perfunctory, a drudgery which we know we ought to do, but we might really prefer to be somewhere else. This is especially problematic for those of us who get paid to do it. We are sometimes there because it is our job. If you have never preached a sermon because you had to, God bless you, but I would guess that day is coming. It is incredibly difficult.

This passionless service and worship distracts us from Christ, drawing our attention away from Him and toward ourselves. We don’t like what we see then. The layperson and the preacher are both prone to this. Falsely passionate worship, faking it, is also distracting. A lack of genuine passion, an act is almost worse than the service which is bloodless.

To distract ourselves from our own failings, our *in se curvatus* (the Confessions’ term for us: bent in on ourselves) nature does not naturally turn to Christ who offers the real solution, but would establish our own rightness by noticing the flaws of others. We start to pick at each other. Contention and strife and discord mark our fellowship. Simon says Jesus should not let this woman touch him.

Because we will not own up to our own sins, we cannot own up to the forgiveness that God has given us either. Because we have not received that, we have none to offer. Our relationships become soured by pettiness and the sort of moral bean counting that remembers every little affront and takes note of every time our good deeds go unnoticed.

The fellowship shrinks, who would invite a friend to this? When I am not sure that I even want to go, it is pretty hard to get excited about bringing someone with me. Then the fellowship loses its focus. Council meetings start with the budget and its shortfall and never go beyond that. We don’t pray for the lost, engage the community, ask what the people around us need that God has given us to share.

We get terribly discouraged by all this and look upon the passionate worship of the woman, the glorious leadership and praise of David, even the plight of the poor Galatians with some envy. At least they were fighting about real stuff. Simon looks for some acceptance or approval for what he is doing. Yet how often we come with our hearts in all the wrong places. Like Simon we miss the point and practice lousy hospitality. He was so concerned about his rectitude he did not give Jesus the water or the greeting or the basic care which was fundamental to that society. Do we get so worked up about the problems “out there” that we forget to love one another?

Depressed yet?

God sends prophets and speakers of the truth, not the thunderbolts we deserve. If he did not care about us, irascible and contentious people would not exist. Sometimes they can
be real jerks, but few prophets were popular either. See it as a sign that God cares. God
 crushes us with the law of words and circumstances. Many a human has found himself
flat upon his back only to discover that looking up from that perspective is not a bad
place to be, especially when they see the smiling face of God extending his hand to pick
us up again. The Law serves the Gospel, it is not an end to itself.

God does not send his son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world.
The woman’s sins were great, but Christ’s forgiveness for her was greater than her sins.
So we don’t need to be afraid to own up to our own sinfulness. Jesus gently or not so
gently pries our stubborn fingers from their stranglehold on the old ways, catching us in
our own words, pointing out our great need for his grace. The real object of Jesus’ love in
the Gospel lesson is not the woman, but Simon. Even crusty old self justifiers get loved
and there is plenty of room at His feet for me too.

Christ has redeemed us from the curse by becoming a curse himself. Jesus knows my
problems, all of them. Yet He still smiles to see me. Like the woman in the story, his love
is despite my sins. He is not pleased by my sins, but his great love brings him to deal with
them when I cannot and deal with them he has.

This great love also means that I now can look upon the sins of my fellow human being
in that light. I don’t have to tell people what they have done wrong, they probably know
it better than I do. My task is to tell them that God has done something about every one of
their problems, including the hurts that have been done to them.

3. Christ lives in me  (Epistle - That the hearer would eagerly anticipate the potent work of
 Christ in his or her life.)

This sermon is a meat and potatoes sort of thing, it builds on the passionate response of
Paul in the first sermon and his embodied freedom in the second sermon of the series.
Today we wrestle with the most consistent objection raised to Paul’s thesis, one which
plagued Luther’s reformation effort and which continues to be unstated but functionally
active today. We don’t think this will work. We believe that real righteousness, real
holiness will take some serious effort on our part, something which we will do to create
it. For us righteousness is a goal to which we would attain through effort and not a gift
already received and which we are blessed to live in every word and deed of life.

There is a tension here. We read our Bibles and hear God calling us to strive, to work,
and do his will. But this text is really about the freedom in which we do this. It is so easy
for us to confuse this and imagine that somehow our works are necessary or that
somehow God responds to them. It is so easy for us to fall into the vending machine
picture of God, as if we simply put the right token in and out will come God’s blessing
and life. If we avoid that we immediately fall of the other side of the horse and imagine
that since we don’t earn heaven with our works we really don’t need to do anything
anymore. We are where the imagined questioner is in the first part of this paragraph of Galatians, saying that Christ serves sin. We think that Christ doesn’t really care about our sinfulness and is tolerant of our moral and other failings. Paul doesn’t have much patience for that.

The works-righteous life has been frequently preached against and all good Lutherans will disavow it, but they mostly turn right around and live it. Augustine once had this happen to him. He preached the grace of God in the face of the Donatist heresy which had a rather pharisaical element. But when a penitent Donatists showed up at the parish on a week when he was gone, his parishioners thought they were doing right by him by putting the poor man through an interrogation and then turning him away as a “faker.” He thought he had preached grace but they heard a new version of the law. Augustine weeps about this in sermon #296 which you can find translated in a splendid little text called “The Essential Sermons of St. Augustine” published by New City Press.

In Luther’s day, the papist opponents argued that grace was simply a license to sin. And indeed, this charge is still laid against us by some. This sort of thinking is really inexplicable to a Christian. He/she finds that Christ’s presence within us is a far stronger impetus to follow Christ’s will, not an invitation to sloth or indifference to sin. Luther argued here with Paul that the only truly righteous act was the action of Christ, the action which he did inside and through us. Luther spoke of a real righteousness, a heavenly righteousness, which was unattainable by anyone through effort, but which was fully attainable through indwelling of Christ, the heavenly king.

But does this actually result in a pathetic righteousness? Does the law make us better? Having lived with Lutherans in Mormon country I can attest to the power of that argument. The LDS gave 10%, they volunteered countless hours at the local wards and agencies. They made really good neighbors. The Lutherans often were not so generous with time, treasure, and talents. But purchasing God’s favor is not a real righteousness, Paul argues.

But Paul also suggests that the real righteousness of which he speaks is in fact more potent, more effective than the Law at changing my life and getting me to be the sort of Person the law calls me to be. Christ lives in us, and he can change a human being in ways the Law with its carrot and stick approach cannot change us. The Law never makes a Mother Theresa or a Martin Luther or any of the heroic Christians who have ever lived. The Law did not make the saintly folks who have served Jesus in the parishes that I have served. That takes Christ at work in us. Here the Old Testament or Gospel text makes a good illustration. This woman did something remarkable in her passionate worship of Christ. David will go on to write Psalm 51 after this event, “create in me a clean heart” words which are sung around the world today. God did something really great through
this forgiven sinner. These great acts, this real righteousness is God working through them, and through us.

This sermon will assert that we are expecting far more than what the LDS do in response to the Law. The Gospel empowers one to give one’s whole life. One does not need to be a reprobate to enjoy this love from God. We sometimes think that the only people who really have faith are the folks with the great turn-around story. But I don’t have that. But the insurance salesman, the engineer, the teacher, or just about anyone can be filled with this Jesus and be this sort of person. The guy in front with the robes may be one in the greatest need. We are expecting (hoping) to see Christ at work in us. You might use the story of Mr. Colgate, the fellow who founded the toothpaste company. By the time of his death he was giving away over 80% of his considerable income. You might focus on someone like Vera Wilson, the elderly widow in my former parish who retired after teaching Sunday School for 69 years. This is a great time to bring in the doctrine of vocation as well. God is served in every moment and in every day. He has rendered holy and good the entirety of our lives.

In any event, this will be the work of Christ, but that work will be Christ in us – in our hands, in our lives, living out the perfection and righteousness which Christ has given us.