

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, June 26 (Proper 8)

Fun Fact: June 25 is the commemoration of the reading of the Augsburg Confession in 1530. If you want to commemorate that you might just print an article or two inside your bulletin. For instance, at the point of the confession of sins you could insert a text box on the side with the brief article on original sin #2. At the point of the Eucharist you might insert another text box with #10. Certainly, at some point, you really should include article #4 on Justification which is the article upon which Luther said that the whole of Christendom either stands or falls. If you are not interested in manually typing these out of your well-worn Book of Concord, you can find a translation online at www.bookofconcord.org.

Over the past three weeks we have, through Luke's eyes, seen Jesus conquer Sin, Death, and Devil. The dead have been raised (Widow of Nain's son), the demons cast out (the man with a legion of demons), the sinners forgiven (the woman who washed Jesus feet with her tears). What more can there be? In a very real sense, and in Luther's own words, that does sum up the Christian faith right there. This can at times create a problem, especially for the preacher who succumbs to the worst sort of preacherly vice: being boring. We have sometimes so overused a word like Savior that we forget the word really means "rescuer" and should get our heart pumping as though we have just witnessed a lifeguard pull a drowning man out of the sea. When we use a word like Savior without remembering its real meaning, we often make such words into some sort of religious jargon which only the insiders understand. Letting such language live and be effective is not that hard, Jesus has rescued us. You could build a church on that one. Anyone up for founding "Christ our Rescuer Lutheran Church"?

God's Word, His Spirit, and the pericopes chosen for the season of Pentecost will not really allow us to be boring, simply repeating some jargon-laden good news, as good as that news is. Instead, we will be challenged to believe and think deeply and prayerfully about just what this all means for us as a human being. We should be ready to have our minds, hearts, and attitudes expanded. Please remember, such expansion usually means a painful or difficult experience.

Today we will expand upon the work of our Savior. That God has sent his Son as a rescuer of the whole world is a given. Christ's mission is not in response to anything that we have done, no, not even our own faith can take credit for that, as good a thing as faith is. Remember that the demoniac with the legion of demons had no faith at all, yet Christ rescued him. While God always praises strong faith, some sort of "total submission" or "complete dependence" is not the prerequisite of God's gracious work in Jesus. Paul is both personally an example of that and quite explicit about that in his letters. While we were still enemies, God reconciled us. In another place in the Bible we could read: This is love that God gave his son for the salvation of the world, all of it. The cross casts its glorious shadow over this whole season, so please don't forget that as we focus intensely on one or another of the consequences of that gift.

Obviously as we go through the next weeks, there is a great deal to chew on there and we will be getting some of this in bite sized chunks. The temptation, or perhaps the trap, to fall into here is to forget the big picture of God's great rescue accomplished in Jesus. Yes, we are heading deeply into the Word of God and all that it means, but for heaven's sake, come up for air once in a while and remember that cross thing. The alternative is to get back on the treadmill of the world, sin and the rest of our enemies, constantly striving to please a God who can never have enough, because I don't have enough to give.

That said, today we will hear Jesus make a radical claim on all of us, but please notice that the claim is made by Jesus, the guy who has given his whole self for us. Lest you forget that, Luke tells us that he is heading to Jerusalem to die. His radical sacrifice means that when He claims us, He is not laying claim to just our Sunday mornings. Of course we know that, after all we give up our Tuesday evenings as well and considerable other hours as we prepare these sermons and that doesn't even account for the time we spend reading and furthering our knowledge of the Bible. But Jesus has claimed much more than that, he has claimed the whole person, the entire man or woman. His claim includes the very best and the worst of us, and nothing is able to preempt him in our life. He has laid claim to our worship, but also our work, our play, our intimate moments and our family. In ascending that brutal hill outside of Jerusalem with a cross on his back, He has taken his place at the top of the whole universe. God has raised Him from death and put Him at his right hand and his Kingdom rules over all creation. This nicely brings us to the Collect for the Day.

Collect of the Day

Lord of all power and might, author and giver of all good things, graft into our hearts the love of Your name and nourish us with all goodness that we may love and serve our neighbor; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*Lord of all power and might, not just some power, but all of it. How does that read differently than just "almighty?" of course the content is the same, but in emphasizing the "all" do we get a nice little law gospel tension building when in the next line we say "giver of **all** good things?" Doesn't this insistence on "all" both power and good mean that God claims the power and the good things that I would like to say are mine? Can I really own anything, even the good things that I claim to control and own? Is there any good that I can author or give? Is it ever entirely proper to say "my faith?" Even though we have this idea that we somehow have something to contribute, even faith itself, must own the fact that God gives that faith relationship. Faith does not save me, Jesus does, yes, through faith, but it is always Jesus who saves.*

This is problematic for many, including Lutherans. Our self-esteem culture really wants me to say that I am a good person. Lutherans chafe at that, sometimes too much. We cannot lose sight of the fact that Jesus does make me truly good. I am indeed a sinner, unable to contribute real good to anything, but God is good, he is goodness itself, and through Word and Spirit he has

made me good, and he works great good. There comes a point where the Lutheran who raises the objection that we are always sinners does so in a denial of the goodness that our Lord has created in cross, Word, and Sacrament.

In our experience power and good don't necessarily go together, do they? That God is strong is only good for those who know his love. For the sinner, for the enemy of God, his strength is terrible to behold. But for the redeemed of God, for the man or woman who has experienced that love in Christ, the power of God becomes incredibly comforting. We often speak of God's power, I wonder how our people hear it. Are they glad of God's power? How we receive such a proclamation says a great deal about the hearer.

Author and giver of all good things: here things start to sound a little more comforting and nice. All good things are sourced in God and delivered by God.

What good thing are we seeking from Him? Why the appeal to his power and might? We want nothing less than the love of his name, but notice that it must be grafted into our hearts. Grafting usually involves cutting the tree or vine and inserting something that is not natively there. It is a violent thing which often involves a bandage when the grafter is done. Are we sure we want to pray for this? To love God's name seems pretty innocuous but hold on a minute here. Is this an objective or subjective genitive here? Who is doing the loving here, or in other words, are we asking to love God's name or are we asking the love which God's name has for us to be infused into our hearts so we may love others? That latter is admittedly a grammatically less likely scenario, but it might just fit the grafting piece better.

It would seem more likely that we are to love God's name, but don't think we are off the hook yet, notice the fruit of this grafting. Good works and loving one's neighbor. The love of God's name, the worship of that name which we do in prayer, praise, song, and the rest of church, that love is not only directed upward, but also outward.

Since I first read them a number of years ago, I find that I am often returning to the words of Justin Martyr about worship in the second century. Justin was an important convert to Christianity. As an intellectual he sought to present a public, rational, and competent face of this growing movement of illiterate slaves, women, and others on the bottom of the society. One of the first apologists for the Christian church he sought to make the Christians acceptable to a Roman Society. Listen to his description of the way a second century church organized (we think he wrote about the year 160)

And on the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in cities or the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits; When the reader has finished, the president in a discourse urges and invites [us] to the imitation of these noble things. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. And, as said before, when we have finished the prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgivings to

the best of his ability, and the congregation assents, saying the Amen; the distribution, and reception of the consecrated [elements] by each one, takes place and they are sent to the absent by the deacons. Those who prosper, and who so wish, contribute, each one as much as he chooses to. What is collected is deposited with the president, and he takes care of orphans and widows, and those who are in want on account of sickness or any other cause, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers who are sojourners among [us], and, briefly, **he is the protector of all those in need.** (Justin Martyr Apology I.67 Emphasis added. If you are interested in reading the whole document, it is found online.)

Notice that the presider (Pastor) was also the one who was charged with the acts of charity and love. There is an intimate connection between the love of God's name (worship) and the love of the neighbor.

Readings

I Kings 19:9b-21 (*This is always the challenge of the OT narratives, they resist the pericope format – insisting that we read them as part of a larger narrative. Elijah being in the cave, where our reading starts, is almost incomprehensible without knowing how he got there. I have included some of the story which leads up to this encounter in the cave.*)

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” ³ Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

⁴ But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.” ⁵ And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, “Arise and eat.” ⁶ And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. ⁷ And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.” ⁸ And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

⁹ There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁰ He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.” ¹¹ And he said, “Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD.” And

behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. ¹³ And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." ¹⁵ And the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. ¹⁶ And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. ¹⁷ And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. ¹⁸ Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

¹⁹ So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. ²⁰ And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." And he said to him, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?" ²¹ And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him.

This is a great passage of the OT and one of the fruitful places to which a theologian may come again and again. Elijah has been faithfully serving the Lord but doesn't seem to be making any progress, despite having just slaughtered some 800 idolatrous prophets of Baal and Asherah. Yet, despite calling down the flames from heaven and demonstrating the power of God, the hearts of the people are just as far away as ever.

Is this really a cautionary tale, warning us that power really does not change the hearts of people? I think it could be healthfully read that way. I remember driving around with my dad shortly before my ordination. He gave me this bit of advice which remains as sound today as it was over twenty years ago. "The Law changes nothing, only the Gospel changes things." He meant that displays and exercises of power were only able to coerce an obedience of fear or reward or something like that. It was only love, particularly the love which was connected to the love of Christ which actually moved people to love, act, think, and be different.

Back to our text: Elijah is strengthened by the angel and finds himself in today's text in a cave at Mt Horeb, which is another word for Mt Sinai, the place where the covenant had been inscribed on stones for Moses. It is the birth place of Israelite faith, a holy place; it is a God place. But clearly the writer of Kings wants us to realize that God has taken Elijah back to the beginning,

Elijah is returning to the very foundations of the faith. This is a reboot of Israel in a sense, at least for Elijah it is.

The Word of the Lord comes to Elijah and asks him what he is doing there and Elijah voices his complaint. He is tired, he is working too hard, and it is not working. He wants to quit. Does he sound like any church workers you know? A professional counselor who was a member of a prior parish read this with me in a Bible study and diagnosed Elijah as a classic case of burn out.

What is up with the idea that Elijah is “Jealous” for the LORD. This may be a translation issue. In modern English, Jealous is almost always negative and suggests something akin to covetousness. But think more in terms of a spouse who is unwilling to share the relationship of his or her spouse with another. That too would be called a form of jealousy, but we don’t think of that as negative all the time. It could simply be a healthy way of looking at the marriage relationship.

It is interesting that the Word (Jesus) does not upbraid Elijah or scold him. He kicked the matter “upstairs.” Elijah is simply told to gird his loins and present himself outside because God is coming. (But God is the Word! How can this be any different? Such questions in the context of Trinity and the effable God often lead to statements which are simply banal. Don’t worry about it.) Three mighty, cataclysmic signs of God’s presence are then perceived. A mighty wind tears the rocks apart. An earthquake splits the ground. A fire scorches the earth. In each of them, however, God is not found.

It is a low whisper, the Hebrew here is not entirely clear, but it seems to be the sound of silence, but I think our text editors must have been afraid of any confusion with Simon and Garfunkel. It is in this gentle sound, this low sound, this no sound, that God is found. The opportunity to find God where we expect him, in the earthquake, fire, and wind has come and gone. God is not in the overt demonstration of power. He is found in a manger, a carpenter’s shop, the paths of rural Galilee, and hanging on a cross.

Elijah, apparently not quite ready to die yet as his earlier speech might imply, wraps his cloak around his head lest he see God and, I can only imagine, stumbles out of the cave to speak with God. He had been speaking with the Word, which is described as a person who comes and speaks with him, and now Elijah leaves to speak to someone else who has come.

Again God now asks the same question the Word asked, surely not because he was looking for information but because Elijah needed to answer it once more. His response is just about verbatim, but the cloak around his head belies the fact that he does not really want to die as he had said earlier. He is actively preserving his own life by refusing to look at God whose presence would fry him.

God’s response is also interesting. The counselor whom I referenced earlier said this was the only thing to do with burned-out people. You first get them out of the situation, change the

scenery; then you get them some help for the seemingly enormous task before them. The counsellor reconfigures the situation so they don't feel so overwhelmed. Finally, you helped them see and celebrate the effectiveness of their work. God sends Elijah on a long journey, to the diametrically opposite corner of the country and beyond. He gets him three people to help him, and that is described quite effectively, and then he tells him about 7000 people who have listened. His work has not been in vain.

We only hear of Elijah calling the first of these helpers. Indeed, it will be Elisha who is instrumental in anointing both Hazael and Jehu later in the book. Apparently even great prophets leave a few things undone.

The call of Elisha is another strange matter. He is apparently wealthy, the son of a wealthy farmer to have twelve yoke of oxen. His place at the rear pair of oxen would have been the administrative place, he could keep an eye on what was transpiring in the other eleven pairs, likely driven by servants. Elijah simply throws his cloak on him and walks off. When Elisha wants simply to clean up a few loose ends, he almost sends him away as Jesus does in the Gospel. Is he testing Elisha's commitment? Is he actively trying to discourage him from a job which Elijah himself is feeling a little ambivalent about? What is up with this conversation between Elijah and Elisha?

Elisha certainly burns his bridges behind him. The oxen are slaughtered and the plough is fuel for the fire of their sacrifice. There is no going back. He throws a low-carb, paleo-diet feast for the crew and sets off after Elijah. Total career change at this point in his life. I looked on Jobdango.com and there were precious few listings for assistant to the prophet.

These paragraphs suggest a number of things the preacher may want to develop. The Word of God and its nature, and the nature of God's interaction with humanity come to mind. God does not use the power and displays, they don't work. It is the small voice, the human voice of an Elijah or a you or a me. What is the difference between this Word who has come so often to Elijah in the past and God himself? The text is often somewhat ambiguous about this, as if the Word is God and at other times, as we see it here, distinct from God. Sounds like the pre-incarnate Christ to me. The Word became flesh – the same Word which talked to Elijah in the cave, the Word with which Elijah would converse on a mountain top somewhere in Palestine 900 years later and recorded in the Gospels.

One could also consider the call of Elisha here. He is pulled from the field, not the company of prophets or the prophet's sons as they are also called. He is a farmer, a successful one at that. He is the one God has in mind.

One might also want to think about the Gospel which God had for Elijah this day. He was weary, he did not think his work was achieving anything, he was discouraged. God had hope for him. There was success he could not see, there was help he did not look for. There was still a purpose and journey to take. God was not done with him, nor was God angry with Elijah despite Elijah's

apparent frustration with God and the foolish accusations he hurled heavenward. God patiently and lovingly deals with his servant here. That might be a sermon in itself.

Other ideas from this text?

We really were attracted to the idea that God came to Elijah in the still small voice. We love the god who comes with fireworks and power, but God often comes gently and humbly. He once was found in a manger, on a cross, in a boat with foolish disciples. He was God through and through, but he was not obviously so. What do we expect of God? Does the Spirit of God open our eyes to see what he has in mind?

Psalm 16

Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

² I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you."

³ As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones,
in whom is all my delight.

⁴ The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply;
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out
or take their names on my lips.

⁵ The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.

⁶ The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

⁷ I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.

⁸ I have set the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.

⁹ Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;
my flesh also dwells secure.

¹⁰ For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption.

¹¹ You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

This Psalm is the one which Elijah should have sung in the cave. It is the articulation of faith in a generation of idolaters. The psalmist has confidence and boldness.

Is it the one we should sing as well? Do we?

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 (Again, for our purposes, I have included the omitted verses. There is a reason vs 12 is not there – remember this is Paul at his most passionate about this subject. As you read the elided portions of this reading, notice all the “severing” language)

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

² Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

⁷ You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸ This persuasion is not from him who calls you. ⁹ A little leaven leavens the whole lump. ¹⁰ I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. ¹¹ But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. ¹² I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

We fulfill the law when we love one another. What is the opposite of that love? I think Paul outlines that in vs. 19-21. The laundry list of wretched things there is the opposite of this love. Are the rest of the fruits of the Spirit then synonyms or explanations of Love? Critical the preacher of this will be the motive for the love. Even response is inadequate as a language here.

We must remove this completely from the economy of buy and sell. God did not purchase my love. I was dead. God loves through me. Christ lives in us (Galatians 2:20). We are recreated in our baptisms to be new people in Christ (Romans 6). That means we bear the fruit of the Spirit, not really in response to God, but because God has re-created us, and dwells into us. The collect speaks of God's love grafted into our hearts. God has literally cut us open with the law and stuck his love into this stony heart of mine. Does this make us spiritual GMO's?

When I teach this book to my NT students we often talk about what makes us angry. Paul is clearly angry in this letter and verse 12 reflects a sort of Paul which we don't often think about. Indeed, Jerome's Vulgate took some of the rough edges off of Paul and it was when he picked up the Greek NT that Luther began to see that this Paul was far more of a kindred spirit than he had ever realized. When I have led congregations through a process of discovering their values, we often ask the question of what we have fought about in the past. That will often be a significant clue to what we find important.

Paul does not exhibit this sort of anger at the gross immorality of the Corinthians. He gets sharp with them, but not like this letter. Nor does he talk this way to the Thessalonians who have some pretty odd ideas about eschatology. But this issue, this freedom of the Gospel issue, this is closer to Paul's heart than anything else. This is the heart of his faith and ours. If we submit to circumcision as if that would make us more acceptable to God, then we might as well chuck the whole cross thing.

It is in that sort of black and white conversation that our reading today takes place. We are free from the need to do anything in order to make God happy. That includes, by the way, believing. We dare not turn faith into the work which God will accept, as if our salvation is somehow God reacting to our faith. Faith is the relationship which he establishes and through which he saves. It is necessary, but not in a causal relationship with God, but as the conduit through which God bestows salvation. It does not occasion our salvation. To hold that faith is somehow something to which God reacts, by the way, is the heresy we know as Semi-Pelagianism and it is rampant in the U. S. religious scene. It has been part of the American Protestant fabric as long as we have been here, especially among those who have read too much of the Wesley brothers and drunk too deeply at the well of the holiness bodies which arose after the third great awakening.

In our over-reaction, however, to the errors of the Wesleyans and their step-children we have sometimes forgotten Paul's other side of the freedom equation, the material which is before us. Luther would be accused of this, struggled against it in the latter years of his life, and it remains the consistent charge leveled against Lutherans. We are antinomians. Freed from the law, we don't even bother to try and keep it. We use our forgiveness as a license and lack appropriate ethical, moral, and other discipline. A quick look at the sexual mores of Scandinavia (shockingly loose) and the rather ugly fact that much of Nazism's worst deeds were perpetrated by people confirmed in Lutheran Churches is marshaled to prove the point. Indeed, when asked what makes a Lutheran different, many Lutheran folks are hard pressed to suggest that we have any

moral purchase in their own life. They are virtually indistinguishable in their TV viewing habits from the rest of society. One of my friends says that when he went to the university the frat boys would say that if you wanted a nice girl to bring home to your mom, you looked for a Baptist or a Church of God girl. If you wanted sex, you sought out a Catholic or a Lutheran. In stewardship terms, God does not make his love contingent upon a tithe of 10%, so moved by his love, we average 2.5%. Meanwhile the LDS who have all the wrong motives and serve a different sort of God altogether shame us by giving 10%. Why is it that our freedom to serve God does not move us to give far more?

Paul today speaks of the freedom to be the person of God. Empowered by the Holy Spirit we may lead a different sort of life. It is a freedom, for we are no longer buying God's favor, it is removed from that dreadful economy of the Spiritual marketplace. But it is now the loving response of a child to his/her dear father, it is the husband who buys the gift for his beloved wife. This is the freely offered gift of the lover to the beloved. Such motives are far more potent than the motives of the marketplace, but only if they are allowed to work. How have we thwarted them in our midst? How will we preach this other way in which we freely produce the fruits of the Spirit?

Too often we lead spiritually stunted lives, for we would see our deeds in that marketplace, or we have simply not connected our deeds to God at all, as if Jesus somehow were concerned only with our Sunday mornings and the few dollars we put into the place. Jesus in the flesh means that the whole of the Christian life is open to the leading and the shaping of the Spirit of God.

It is very important to notice that while Paul can speak quite specifically of what we should not do, sins we should not commit, he speaks much more generally when it comes to the positive things we should do and indeed it really has to be that way. The fruits of the Spirit are applicable to all sorts of different things and actions on the part of the human being. We cannot simply give a list of approved activities, indeed any activity can become a sin, and just about any activity can be done in gentleness, kindness, humility, etc. If someone cuts me with a knife I am horrified and call the police, unless I am in the hospital and he is my surgeon, then the guy with a knife may well be considered somewhat heroic. It all depends on context, motive, and many other things. Notice the second man in the Gospel reading today whom Jesus seems to rebuke for his desire to honor his parents. Even family can be an idol.

The preacher who would preach this text will want to notice that this is a great mystery of the faith. We have frequently said that Christ and the Christian's obedience to Him needs no explanation for the believer, and to the one who does not believe there is no explanation which will satisfy. Why does the lover go out of his way to do the little kindness for his beloved? There is no logical reason, he is not seeking to buy something with his deed, or it is not really love. He does it simply for the joy and the love of doing the kindness for her. Can one really explain that? Probably not, but we can proclaim it, and if we clearly proclaim that such a life is in fact God at work within us, it also can be a word of sweet Gospel to the person who is struggling with

his/her life. Just as any husband or wife who enters this discussion will remember a score of times in which he or she failed to love as well as possible, the Christian will be quick to remember our failures. But put this into the work of God in our midst – he also bears the sins in Christ and the responsibility for the right in Christ. Proclaim that Jesus stands ready today to work a good thing through you, right now.

Luke 9:51-62 (The cost of discipleship – we even have to give up our anger)

⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. ⁵³ But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” ⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ And they went on to another village.

⁵⁷ As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” ⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” ⁵⁹ To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰ And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹ Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” ⁶² Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

This is a text which requires the preacher to put both his thinking and believing cap firmly on his head. It is not obvious, but it is rich.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He sets his face toward that city where he will die as the sacrificial lamb for the sake of the whole world. Luke’s Gospel has a strong sense of the importance of Jerusalem. Seeing as he is in Galilee at this point, between him and Jerusalem lay the little region of Samaria. Normally Jews, who hated Samaritans, would go around the country rather than risk defilement by any association with these despised and flawed imitators of their faith. They would rather speak to a Roman. But Jesus takes the direct route, right through the middle of Samaria.

The Samaritans apparently return the hatred of the Jews with a similar loathing. In actuality, Samaritan religion had some similarities with the Jews, but we often reserve our deepest enmity for those who are closest to us. When they perceive that Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem, they will not receive him. He is a hated Jew. When this becomes clear, James and John, offer to call down fire on the village. But Jesus rebukes them and they simply head into another village.

As if that was not strange enough, Luke then tells the story of three potential disciples. One gets the idea that none of these fellows may have followed Jesus; although, it is possible that some did.

The first man is willing, but Jesus seems to speak discouraging words. There is no comfort here, only insecurity and no real home. Even the foxes in the field have it better.

The second man wants to return and keep the fourth commandment by burying his parents. This is a good and honorable thing to do. It is quite possible that they are not dead yet, but simply aged and he has to take care of them until they die. Jesus words seem particularly harsh, especially to a man who is seeking to do the right thing.

The third man, when invited by Jesus to follow him, responds simply that he wants to return to bid farewell to his family and loved ones. Is Elisha the model here, munching on his freshly barbequed oxen, roasted over a fire of plough parts? He did not look back. Jesus questions this man's fitness for the kingdom of God. Pretty harsh stuff from Jesus!

It is another of those Sundays when you wonder if "this is the Gospel of the Lord" really is the best way to conclude the lesson.

What shall we make of this? I want to run all this through a filter of God's radical claim upon the human being. James and John have zeal, the first man seems to have failed the kingdom test for matters of comfort, the second is obedient to the Law, and the third simply wants to honor relationship. All of them, good and bad, seem to stumble because they miss the point that Jesus is first. He has taken a claim over us which even transcends our best moments.

A wise old preacher once told me that God came to redeem me from my virtues as well as my vices. We can easily see how God would save me from my vices, my sins. Every religion wants me to eschew sin, whether we are talking about Christianity, Hinduism, Islam or just about any others. But the NT's radical claim for Jesus is that he graciously transcends and lays claim to the entirety of a human life. Just as the sins are no longer what keep us from God, the virtues are no longer what bring us close to him. We like to think that we somehow distinguish ourselves from our damned neighbors because we at least got something right. But these guys all do things which ostensibly could be virtues. James and John have zeal, but Jesus rebukes them. Their zeal is not his nor really for him, but about repaying some perceived affront to Jesus' and their dignity. The first man whom Jesus seems to send away, is only looking to care for this body, to take care of the gift which God has given him, but that too can become a form of idolatry. Even the second and third men whom Jesus rejects for their filial duty to family are doing good things, but they are missing the point. It is Jesus calling them. He transcends all these things, gives meaning to all them.

This is not to say that one should abandon duty to parents. Indeed, the Bible is quite clear about this. Jesus is not overturning the fourth commandment, but he is suggesting that obedience of the fourth commandment which is not first and foremost obedience to him is not true obedience.

Perhaps an example is the best way to talk about this. My first parish was in a suburb of Salt Lake City, Bountiful, Utah. It was 90+% LDS the whole time that I was there and still is today. This meant that simple survival for a Lutheran congregation was at times precarious. Most of the

LDS hierarchy lived in Bountiful as it was a pleasant, affluent community quite close to downtown Salt Lake City. These were not simply Mormons, but often uber-Mormons.

It was a constant struggle for me personally and for us as a congregation not to give into the natural prejudice which such a situation engenders. The LDS really could be odious at times. But to hate them, even when justified by the fact that we were “right” and they were “wrong,” was missing the Jesus point of all this. It would have been very easy for us to assert that we were being faithful Christians as we bashed our LDS neighbors, but such faith would have been alien to the faith which God planted in us on the day of our baptism and which he tended and nourished through Word and Sacrament. It sometimes felt so good and faithful to draw our lines and love the fact that we were “in” and they were “out,” but that was to forget that Jesus’ blood had been shed for them too. Remember where Jesus is heading when all this takes place?

Does such an example help us see how our “virtues” can be things from which we need to be saved just as much as our vices? Jesus today speaks to men who all think they are doing the right thing, but they are off the mark somehow. How are we today holding up our sinful virtues to God and asking him to bless and approve? What does he say to such a thing? What should he say except what Jesus says to these men?

Law and Gospel

1. I sometimes feel a lot like Elijah in the Old Testament – I am tired, I don’t think this is working, and I wonder if it is worth it. God has refreshment and answers for me. He opens my eyes to see the beauty of what he is doing and gives me hope.
2. Jesus calls but I am often unwilling to let him have my life. I might give him a part of it, a portion of myself and my time, but not the whole thing. Yet, Jesus does not wait for my commitment before he acts. He has given himself wholly and thereby staked a claim over the totality of my life.
3. When I do try to give my whole life, I almost always make a complete muddle of it. My zeal is misplaced, my priorities are skewed, I get frustrated, and most often imagine that I am doing something which God will love and therefore reward me. But God is not put off by my failures, rather he gently and firmly takes me by my sinful hand, he enters my sinful heart, he pours out his holy Self into my sinful Self and works the transformation which I cannot ever hope to effect.
4. I am afraid of what this means. I feel vulnerable and defenseless without my carefully constructed walls and self-serving practices. I have been burned so often I find it difficult not to be looking out for myself always, and that distracts me from him. But he opens the eyes of the blind and calls the stubbornly inwardly turned. He points me to another way to live which flows out of his sacrifice, his love, his peace, his kindness and gentleness, which is a truly human being.

Sermon Ideas

1. The True Freedom (Epistle Sermon Series – That the hearer, freed from the tyranny of vice and virtue, would experience the far more potent motivation of walking in the Holy Spirit.)

The preacher today will likely want to mine the other readings for illustration or see in them possible models for more contemporary illustrations. Why does Elisha burn that plough and roast the oxen? He was giving up a successful career and family obligations. Why does Jesus speak to the potential disciples as he does, and if that is the way that he talks, why do any of them follow him? Why do all of the apostles, except for John, bravely face martyrdom? This question might prove an excellent device for getting into this text.

Paul wants us to see and be moved by a completely other motivation from that of the world. The world only understands fear, power, and greed. Its ways and means result in lives which are plagued by strife, anger, jealousy, and much that is evil. And yet, because they cannot see any other way, they cope and try to make the best of it. I am not against bureaucracy, it is a necessary thing in this broken world, but at the same time, the laws, rules, regulations, handbooks, and other things of the bureaucratic world cannot make one person into a good person. All they can do is assume that we are operating out of self-interest and try to curb the excesses of that self-interest. The Christian anthropology which admits that a person can be moved by a truly Holy Spirit seems to imagine so much more possibility for us.

Paul is imagining that other and holy motive for us today when he speaks of the fruits of the Spirit. The challenge of the preacher will first be to describe and explain that fruit-filled life in a way which captures its beauty and potency. The sinful flesh and world will want us to see it as weak, boring, trite, passing away, and foolish. The charges have some merit, if you are considering this life from the perspective of the world. The way of the Spirit doesn't look like it should work and it has no guarantees and is often vulnerable to the abuse of others. Any attempt to find guarantees and to preclude such abuse is simply antithetical to the Spirit-filled and fruitful life Paul has in mind. It is frightening for the old man to contemplate, but the old man must die and Christ calls forth a new man who sees things differently.

For Paul this all flows from the cross of Christ which has answered the important questions and changed everything for us. My sins and my virtues have simply been removed from the economy of my relationship with God. It is all gift from him, all grace, all love. That means I can live that life of grace, love, and giftedness. I no longer need to get even. I no longer have to balance any scales. I may be in a job which requires justice

or parity or fairness, but the person who standing before me in that job, having made a train wreck of his or her life, is not judged on that account by me. My job may hold them accountable, but my faith, my heart, sees them as another broken person like me for whom Jesus died. I have been freed from that tyrannical overlord so I can treat them with love, dignity, respect, and kindness. This is just one dramatic way we might walk by the Spirit. There are many more.

There could be all sorts of potential applications for this. I might disagree with my neighbor about his politics, but I can comfort him in his grief. I might profoundly disagree with Islam, but I could feed a hungry Moslem. I just don't need to be the person who lives in that world of scales and balances, at least that world does not need to govern my heart. It did not govern God's treatment of me, it does not need to dictate my treatment of a fellow human being. The dictator of my life is love – yes, I am slave to love, but it is a beautiful slavery. Paul cautions us against letting our freedom simply be another form of slavery to the world and our flesh. We are all obedient to someone, Paul suggests that we be obedient to love, the love that is Jesus, the love which lives in us in the Holy Spirit.

It might be good for the preacher to find some person from the congregation's recent past, a godly man or woman who has died and was a great witness to the love of God. Use that person to ask the question – how could they do that? The simple answer is that this person did not do it. God did that, living in and through that person. The wonderful acts of love which we remember and rejoice in are God at work. That same Jesus and Spirit are at work in you too! They are the fruits of the Spirit, not the fruit of my good work.

The human being wants the Spirit of God to do the work but to leave me alone. He also wants to be in control. The preacher will need to address that old stinker who clings so tightly to us. We cannot use this as license to do nothing. But we also cannot claim some virtue from the doing.

2. The Whole Person (Gospel - That the congregant would hear Jesus lay claim to his/her whole life, both to forgive it and to give it renewed purpose and meaning.)

This sermon must walk a fine line. God does not wait for total submission before he will give himself totally to us. The demoniac of last week's lesson had no faith and was saved. The disciples in the boat are rescued from the waves and chided for weakness of faith. God is not measuring our commitment before he acts.

That said, the action of God does establish a claim over the whole person. God has not simply died for the worship hour on Sunday or the part of bank account that we decide to give him. He has died for the whole person, the entirety of humanity.

We like to think that of course he died for my bad spots, but my good spots are pretty well mine and he should take them with little or no change. The Zebedee brothers in the Gospel lesson found that their zeal for the Lord was also an occasion which heard a rebuke and needed correction by Jesus.

The man who sought his family needed to seek his family in Christ. Following Christ would most likely not have meant that Jesus would have kept him from them, but first he must follow Christ. Even family can be an impediment to his following God. So too the man who would bury his parents or was discouraged because he might be forced to choose between comfort and Christ.

This would be a very good day to remind the congregation of their confirmation vows. In there we ask them if they would be willing to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from this confession of Christ. I find it really interesting that upon hearing a person make that vow we immediately turn and pray, as if we are saying “Oh, no! What have we done?” We cannot keep such a vow, but God makes such a claim and he will be both necessary and present for keeping such a vow.

Jesus perhaps points out the futility for us of meeting this demand, but at the same he also creates in his cross and resurrection the very instrument which would grab Peter, James and John, Paul and countless Christians since then and take up their whole lives.

The Gospel here is that God makes this impossible demand because he fully intends to keep it himself. We do not remove responsibility from people with this, but we do empower their lives with the Holy Spirit.

3. The Fruits of the Spirit (That the hearer, touched by the Spirit of God in the Word made audible, tangible, and tastable, would bear the fruits of the Spirit.)

This sermon remembers that the loving obedience of faith is not a cookie cutter sort of thing. What is fruitful in one place is not always fruitful in the other. There is no Christian dress code which says that women must wear this or men wear that, despite several attempts to do just that in the past. There is no dietary code which dictates that we will eat only these things and not those things. You will find Christians who munch on pork rinds and others who are vegans. There is not list of approved deeds for all Christians to do, but there is a list of things we do not do. Paul can get quite explicit in speaking about gossip, lying, sexual immorality, etc.

Too often, however, we have used the lack of a definitive description of Christian life to be a license to do very little, to simply blend into the larger culture and think that because we don't have a mandate to do this or that we need do very little. Such an idea is to misread the words of Paul. God does have something beautiful in mind for us, a way of life, a positive description of that life, but he will describe in terms of its fruit, not its actions. Hence he will not say, “You must give 10% of your income” or “You must spend

every Monday night with your family.” A mandated amount of a gift would preclude giving more, and to turn loving my family into an obedience of a command would gut such love of its real heart and power.

God instead speaks of the fruit of our doings. I believe the order here is somewhat significant: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. We start with **love**. Our doings are infused with the love which God has poured into us. That means they are **joyful**, not dour like some puritanical severity, but they are joyful because they are filled with love. That love and joy combine to create **peace**. This peace is within ourselves as a serenity and also a peace which obtains between us and others. This in turn produces a **patience** with the world and with other people. I don't need to react to their slights and their faults. I know that God has forgiven them and me. I am loved, I am joyful, peace has been established between us. I can patiently and lovingly deal with them. That patience is the fruitful location of **kindness**. When I am no longer reacting to what someone has done to me, I can now ask what is best for them, what is the kindly thing to do. When I am patiently exercising kindness toward my neighbor, then real **goodness** is possible. As long as I am self-centered and reacting to them, I cannot achieve real good in their life or mine. I will always be on the take, seeking from them either restitution or some sort of advantage. Goodness is different than kindness, I can be kind to the stranger on the street, but to achieve real goodness in another life I must have time, relationship, and that goodness will then yield the next thing, **faithfulness**. This is the fruit of long and durable relationships in which I have been forgiving and forgiven. This is the sort of relationship in which I would die for you, and you would die for me. We are faithful to one another. We trust and love and care fully and beautifully. One of the marks of such a relationship will the **gentleness** with which we treat one another. It is the reactionary, the self-seeker, and the fearful person who needs to be cruel and laugh at the errors and foibles of another. The world, unable to understand these things, makes rude mockery of the gentle people, but it envies them as well. For its cruelty and barbarism covers a deep longing to be gently loved. When all these things come together, we are able to exercise true self-governance, which I think is the better word than **self-control**. When we are not afraid, secure in our relationship with God and the other, as God has defined these things, then we can actually start to govern our own actions, words and even thoughts. The Devil has perversely created a misunderstanding of this, as though the person who seeks only their pleasure in some sexual way or power, or fame, that is the truly “free” person exercising their free will. The one who controls his or her sexuality is somehow “repressed.” But are we not more than our libido? Are we not more than the biological urge to reproduce? Are we not a human being? What exactly does that mean? The preacher may want to address the fact that our world tends to see a human being exclusively through a sexual lens. Perhaps I am reacting to the gay-pride parade which Portland just hosted.

We no longer see the other person simply as an object of envy, or jealousy, or desire, or as an enemy, no matter what they may think of us. God's love infused into our hearts frees us to be in control of ourselves in a way that no laws, no education, no amount of money or anything else is able to offer us.

This sermon needs to be more than simply a good idea. The fruits of the Spirit are nothing less than Christ working through us. The fruits of the Spirit are not the token we give in order for God to love us, they are the natural fruit of what God has done within us. The preacher might want to talk at the end of the sermon about the nature of fruit itself. The apple tree does not decide to make an apple, it does it. Bearing fruit does not make the tree an apple tree, but because of what it is, it bears fruit. The Christian likewise is not bearing these fruits to become a Christian, but because God has already declared him/her to be a Christian.

We also suggested that this is too much for a single sermon. The preacher might consider preaching one of the fruits of the Spirit. One might even do a whole sermon series on these fruits, or perhaps this needs to migrate to the Bible study hour in tandem with the Sermon.