

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost – October 23

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

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

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

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

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

If we have managed to put our lives into some sort of Christian order, through the indwelling of the Spirit, that very success surely will be the next occasion for Satan's temptation. We will soon be tempted to believe that somehow this new-found order in my life, this proper regulation, this victory over sin is somehow what sets me apart from the other human being, the one who is still

wallowing in sin. I have overcome this lust, this passion, this flaw, while this other poor wretch has not. We might believe that this is what separates us from one another.

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

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

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You are always more ready to hear than we to pray and always ready to give more than we either desire or deserve. Pour down on us the abundance of Your mercy; forgive us those things of which our conscience is afraid; and give us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask except by the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

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

He is always ready to give us more than we either desire or deserve. Again, we will see Cain in this, but also the Pharisee and the Publican of the Gospel lesson and the Disciples who are shooing away the children in the Gospel too. God is ready to surprise us with his goodness,

always. We think we have this system figured out, and our guilty conscience is afraid of what that means. We deserve God's wrath. We know that, hence we are loathe to speak to him, hoping in some childish way to avoid his attention.

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

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

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

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

Readings

Genesis 4:1-15 *I thought it worth the effort to include the story of Cain and his family. It is a sad story and one which the author of Genesis gives us as a warning and an indictment of the way we are. Reading it we find much of ourselves therein and must come to the conclusion that we are more like Cain and his ilk than Abel.*

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

⁸ Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"¹⁰ And the LORD said, "What have you done?"

The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. ¹¹ And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” ¹³ Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear. ¹⁴ Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.” ¹⁵ Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. ¹⁶ *Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.*

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

²³ *Lamech said to his wives:*

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

²⁴ *If Cain's revenge is sevenfold,
then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold.”*

²⁵ *And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth,*

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

We learn about God from this passage:

- 1. He has standards- the offering of Cain is not accepted. Justice is not shortchanged.*
- 2. He is pro-active – he seeks out and seeks to warn Cain prior to the sin.*
- 3. God does not force Cain – he knows about the sin which is at the door, and he does not tie up Cain and prevent him from doing what he does. God allows him freedom to sin. He seems to value our free will more than we do sometimes.*

4. *God is very gracious. He comes to Cain knowing he had murdered Abel and offers him the opportunity to confess and repent. Even though Cain does not take him up on that, he still has a gracious sign to put on Cain.*
5. *God desired relationship with Cain – he wanted him to “do well” and to “be acceptable.” It is our faith which makes our lives “well lived” and “acceptable” to God.*

Cain was entrapped, captured by sin. Several points in the Epistles speak of a person who has been “trapped” or “snared” by sin and enjoins the community of believers to restore such a person gently. (Galatians, I John, Hebrews, etc.) Outside the relationship (faith) with God we are vulnerable and subject to such ensnarement. It waits eagerly at the doors of our homes and churches and lives.

In the past we wondered whether the first sin was really the failure of relationship that is spoken in the sort of offering that Cain brings. Abel brings the first, but Cain brings some, after he has laid claim to the first for himself. (That is the implication.) Cain counted upon himself and worshipped God as an obligation. Abel counts on God to provide a second fruit, so he gives the first lamb from the flock. Cain, however, makes sure that his larder is full, and then gives some to his God. Cain might have argued that his offering was just as good, and indeed it was in a real or economic sense, but it was always his heart that God was interested in, not the caloric value of that lamb or that bushel of wheat.

So one could argue that the first sin after the fall into sin was the sin of hubristic pride. We want to be the arbiter, the judge, the decider. We want to be the one who holds the power of life and death, who stubbornly refuses to submit to the will of God. Our current culture has even made such attitudes heroic. I have read more than one fiction writer who has portrayed his “Cain” character as the hero of this scene for refusing to bend his will to the will of some god. Or do they pick up on the fact that Cain is resisting responsibility? But Cain has slain his brother and brought great sorrow to the world. His brother’s blood cries out to God, seeking justice, a justice which God actually forbears for the sake of Cain. Jesus says that God forbore all such justice until he achieved that in Christ (Romans 3).

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

But this text is more than just foundational for the Gospel text. A number of interesting questions arise. Why does God not accept Cain’s offering? Many point to the fact that while Abel offers the

first fruits of his flock, Cain only brings “an offering” from his fields. But that is not explicitly stated and it probably needs to be heard with some caution if for no other reason that the whole contemptuous pride which is our theme today. (I am sure glad I wrote my offering check before I paid my mortgage! – O wait, spiritual pride again, aaaagh! Who will free me from this body of death? Praise be to Christ our Savior!)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psalm 5

Give ear to my words, O LORD;
consider my groaning.

² Give attention to the sound of my cry,
my King and my God,
for to you do I pray.

³ O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;
in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.

⁴ For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;
evil may not dwell with you.

⁵ The boastful shall not stand before your eyes;
you hate all evildoers.

⁶ You destroy those who speak lies;
the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.

⁷ But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love,
will enter your house.

I will bow down toward your holy temple
in the fear of you.

⁸ Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness
because of my enemies;
make your way straight before me.

⁹ For there is no truth in their mouth;
their inmost self is destruction;

their throat is an open grave;

they flatter with their tongue.

¹⁰ Make them bear their guilt, O God;

let them fall by their own counsels;

because of the abundance of their transgressions cast them out,

for they have rebelled against you.

¹¹ But let all who take refuge in you rejoice;

let them ever sing for joy,

and spread your protection over them,

that those who love your name may exult in you.

¹² For you bless the righteous, O LORD;

you cover him with favor as with a shield.

I don't know about you, but I wish I preached the psalms more often. My Lutheran theology is sometimes altogether too intellectual at the expense of the other dimensions of the human being. The first verses of this marvelous poem really resonated with me. It is middle of the term around here and it has already been a tough term. The first verses just seem to encapsulate what I want to pray this day. "Lord, listen to my groaning." Feels a little like that is all I can get out, a groan. Forget articulating some beautiful prayer, I am lucky to part my lips and utter some groan.

The psalm then continues to become a really interesting study in theological psychology. The author, if the superscription is to be taken seriously, is David. He notes that God destroys the liar, the wicked doer, the bloodthirsty and deceitful man. But wait a minute, that is David! That is me too.

Verse 7 is the really interesting one. Through the steadfast love of God David enters the house of God, bowing toward his temple and beseeches God lead him in right-ness. But if God is going to do that he must slay the old David, the stinker David. Luther's insight might be critical here. David is giving voice to the words of his Son and God's Son, they are the same man. He walks up a brutal hill amid the jeers and taunts of his enemies. I think of Him praying these words on the way up to Golgatha and death. Through God's love he will bow down in the holy sanctuary, even the stinkers like David and me.

Now we can take refuge in God and rejoice. We can even sing for joy. God spreads his protection over us. Death can do its worst, I will live again. Satan can accuse, I stand redeemed and forgiven. The world can suck me in and chew me up, leaving me an emotional cripple, but he will bless me in his righteousness and cover me with favor as a shield. .

This is a psalm which fits beautifully in Romans 7 and Baptismal theology.

II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 *Our editors have excised much of the personal material here – I have retained, I think it is necessary for getting the gist of the beautiful confession which Paul makes in the material which comprises our reading.*

⁶For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

⁹*Do your best to come to me soon.* ¹⁰*For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.* ¹¹*Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.* ¹²*Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus.* ¹³*When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.* ¹⁴*Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds.* ¹⁵*Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message.* ¹⁶*At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them!* ¹⁷*But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.* ¹⁸*The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

¹⁹*Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus.* ²⁰*Erastus remained at Corinth, and I left Trophimus, who was ill, at Miletus.* ²¹*Do your best to come before winter. Eubulus sends greetings to you, as do Pudens and Linus and Claudia and all the brothers.*

²²*The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.*

The preacher attracted to this text will likely want to preach the famous words: “I have fought the good fight.” And that is a great sermon, both if you simply preach the life of Paul as an inspiration for the Christian or if you apply that to the life of the whole church and its individuals. Paul dies with total confidence in Christ. Jesus, the righteous judge, has a crown of righteousness for Paul. He is facing death at the hands of a Roman soldier in the immediate future. He has been betrayed and abandoned by friends, but Jesus has not abandoned him. Jesus will rescue him from every trouble, whether that is by turning this situation around or by raising him from the grave, Jesus always has that last word.

The omitted verses are helpful for reminding the reader that this is a very human being who writes these letters. I think sometimes we elevate Paul to this super-human status, and in so doing make into another sort of human being than we are. But that is a mistake. He was very much like we are. Here is a man who is in prison and is cold. He wants Timothy to bring a cloak. He needs something to read while he is in prison. He is alone except for a few friends and he begs this young man, this Timothy, to come and see him before he dies.

What I have always found interesting is that Paul asks Timothy to come. Nero was descending into madness. The situation in Rome for Christians was dangerous to say the least. Nero was

literally soaking them in oil, affixing them to poles and setting them ablaze to illuminate his dinner parties at the imperial palace. You can read about this in Suetonius, an early second century author who wrote a wonderful but scandalous history of the Roman emperors, sort of a “tell all” account. Still Paul, oblivious to danger, asks Timothy to come. I have always thought this would make an excellent dramatization as Timothy wrestles with that request. I wonder if he was afraid. I wonder why Paul doesn’t say, “Run from this place!” Instead he urges Timothy to come. What does that say about Paul’s understanding of suffering and his own death?

Notice how verse 17 encapsulates the purpose for all these things. Paul’s life, the fight he has fought, the race he has run, is all tied up in something larger than Paul, it is the message to the Gentiles which God has always wanted to preach. This has never been about Paul’s comfort and ease, but about a divinely described and prescribed mission. Jesus has always occupied the center of Paul’s universe since the day he fell off that horse on the way to Damascus. The preacher who is interested in this text will want to take that and apply to the whole of humanity. We are all invited and made important in the ministry of God to this broken world. We are more than simply keeping the faith for ourselves, we are the instruments of God by which he loves this world. Yes, faith keeping is essential, for faith is the tool by which God saves, but faith keeping is not the goal, it is the tool. The real goal in Paul’s ministry is always the proclamation of God’s love.

For the Christian, he/she has some very good news here. Troubles are temporary, there is a crown of life in store, but even more than that, God is strengthening his soldiers for the fight, his athletes as they strain toward the prize. We may find ourselves gasping for breath, the race may not always seem to go well, but God offers his people his strength and his peace for this journey, strength to carry this day, the peace which passes our human understanding.

Luke 18:9-17

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

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

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

This is a great text to get ready for Reformation Sunday next week: What is the idolatrous trust of self which we see today? Luther thought buying an indulgence was trusting oneself and one's own resources when it came to the realm of the spiritual economy. That was one of his chief arguments against the practice. It produced lazy, self-confident Christians instead of true penitence.

- 1. We see this self-trust in the contempt/loathing/judgmental behaviors expressed to others who do not meet our moral code. The Christian believes that my sins are just as bad as another. Indeed, Paul says he is the worst of all sinners. God's love is shown to all the world. When we make the distinctions which would suggest that God loves some more than others, we are trusting that we have qualified for the "beloved" category. This is just spiritual pride. We love to deflect attention away from this by putting a label on the other person which allows us to deny our problems and say that I have not descended to that level of depravity.*
- 2. It could be when I point to my own piety and good works and think that this has somehow earned some points with God. This sounds like a good straw-man today, however. Do we really see folks like this in our parishes? Or do we see some who haughtily look down on those outside and trust in the fact that they got their catechism right or at least have confessed faith, accepted Jesus, or something along those lines and that means we won't be joining those folks on the down escalator at the end of time. Do we trust our Lutheran label more than Christ?*
- 3. Very few are thinking that God is rewarding them for good works such as giving money, going to church, or something like that. But do we have a spiritual pride which insists on our "worminess" and will not actually accept the gracious love of Christ shown to me? Do we as preachers get nervous when someone compliments us on our sermon? Does it make us uncomfortable hear someone say we did a good job. Are we too quick to point to our weakness and forget to point to Christ's strength through us? Is this a form of trusting in our penitence? Is this what we imagine makes us acceptable to God?*
- 4. Do we sometimes think that we are theologically right and do we trust in our rectitude over against the "Baptists" or another group? Lutheranism is a theological and sometimes too intellectual of a movement. Do we trust that our theology is right?*
- 5. A great way to gauge what we or others think about this is to listen carefully as we confront death at a funeral. What do we say about this person? We have a human tendency to say they were good, but we really need to say that Jesus was good to this person, forgiving them, loving them, and today, as they have died, keeping the promise made in baptism.*

I am increasingly aware of the way that the Gospels "use" children in their presentation of Jesus. I did a little survey of this in the Gospels and without fail, when these stories of Jesus holding or focusing on a child are presented, they come right after a very strong statement of the

Law, such as Mark 10 or Matthew 19. Jesus' reception of children, his care for them, his words about them, suggest that somehow we are to be "child-like." But here I also see Satan's work. He has redefined childhood in our culture for this very reason, to spoil our reading of these precious texts.

Since Victorian times, we have defined children as innocent, without sin, until an age of accountability, usually around the age of 7-12. But the ancients did not see children that way, through a moralizing lens. I too can say that my infant is not really morally culpable for making me get up in the middle of the night, but that midnight shuffle to calm a crying infant is still miserable to do. In the eyes of folks in the ancient world children were weak and helpless, without the ability to solve their own problems, feed themselves, hold a job, or own property. The rites of adulthood in the ancient world were far more significant for the individual than they are today, but still we start to account a person responsible and grown up when we give them a license to drive a car, let them vote, let them drink, and finally allow them to rent a car at the age of 25. In the ancient world the rite of becoming a man meant that you were now able to own property, marry, and otherwise govern your own affairs. In the ancient Jewish culture the final rite of manhood did not happen until you were 30 – that is why Jesus does not start preaching until he reaches that milestone.

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

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

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

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

The preacher may also, if it is in certain situations, want to preach infant baptism this day. It is a divisive practice in North America. There is a fair amount of the protestant world which considers this practice to be unbiblical and fundamentally a popish mistake. Yet Luke is careful to tell us that these are infants who are brought to Jesus. The word he uses indicates a child who cannot yet speak “brephes.”

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

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

Law and Gospel

1. Sin has worked a terrible thing in me and the rest of humanity. It is not the case that we have some large remnant of the image of God still at work in our lives. Humanity’s fall was absolute and complete. Cain slew Abel. That shattered brokenness obtains in the heart of every human being. But God sought out Cain, did not bring on his head the hellish torment which his sin deserved, but he pleaded with him, ameliorated the consequences of what he had done, and even vouchsafed his life. God still loves his broken creation.
2. The brokenness wrought by humanity’s fall into sin often comes to bite me hard, sometimes as the consequences of what I have done wrong, but sometimes out of sheer arbitrary and evil happenstance. Paul has preached the good news, and now he stands accused and will be slain for it. It is not fair, it is not right, and he will shed his blood unjustly. Just as the blood of Abel cried out, so too does the blood of Paul, and so too does the blood of every Christian martyr and suffering saint. But louder than them all is the blood of Jesus, whose death has conquered death, whose suffering has redeemed all

suffering. Paul rejoices even on the day they lead him out to execution. His life is in God's merciful hands, his suffering has been united to Christ's suffering. Through Christ he has conquered the death they will deal him.

3. The brokenness of humanity after the Fall remains tragically apparent in the community of faith – often evidenced in a spiritual pride. Our enemy delights in this pride, for it is a potent force to obscure the love of God and prevent the work of Jesus and his Kingdom. The Church might look upon itself and realize that it has often been a lousy ambassador of God's reconciliation. We have been a country club church, excluding far more than we have embraced with the forgiving love of Christ. But Jesus has good news for us when we realize that we have made a mess of it, that we are helpless before our sin. He takes the little ones into his arms and blesses them and sets them on the path of life again, and again, and again.

Sermon Ideas

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

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

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

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

an offering in the plate, but we are not given points with God for doing this. In the real analysis, they don't really matter.

It is not a comfortable sermon for the institution that way. Institutions are all about setting up boundaries which acknowledge the borders between the saved and unsaved. But this sermon is about smashing some of those comfortable things. Jesus is upsetting the institutional apple cart here and this sermon should have an edge to it which makes some folks uncomfortable. The things they are relying upon may not be as stable as they think they are. God is not asking which denomination you attend, nor is he asking how well you have managed to cope with sin or control your impulses. He is looking for that faith which stretches out its hands to Jesus as he picks you up from the mire of sin and death you have made for yourself, which every human being has made for him or herself since Adam and Eve and Cain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. “The good fight, the race, the faith, the crown” (Based on the Epistle Reading: That the hearer would be comforted by Jesus promise to all whom he has redeemed – our value and worth in the kingdom of heaven is not determined by our success and failure, but on the work of Christ in the cross and empty tomb.)

Paul had wanted to go to Spain, he had wanted to break new missionary ground and do more and more, but a riotous crowd in Jerusalem, a corrupt judge, a mad emperor, have all come together now so that he facing an execution. His life is being poured out. Is he a failure? We might scoff at the idea that the mighty apostle Paul was a failure, but just read his letters. His congregations were no model of how to run a church. His ministry was fraught with dissension and controversy. He was thrown in jail, punished, run out of town, on more than one occasion!

Now, convicted by a court of law, he is about to die. This one time persecutor of the Way, now a proclaimer of Christ, will be led out to a post, chained to it, and his head will be chopped off. Thus ends Saul of Tarsus, better known as the Apostle Paul. Except that is hardly the end of it. God does not throw away his precious children that way.

Paul has been a precious child of God since the day that Ananias poured the waters of Baptism over his head. He has been his chosen instrument to bring the gospel before kings and governors and gentiles of all sorts, but along the way he has fought with Peter, fought with the Judaizers, perhaps even regrets that comment in Galatians 5:12. He got into a terrible fight with his congregation in Corinth. It has not all been sweet and good, and yet, he can say, he has fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith, and now a crown awaits him.

That crown which awaits him has much more to do with the waters of his baptism and the grace that God showed Saul the Persecutor than it does all the good things that Paul the Apostle did. That same crown awaits us all in Christ. The Lord has rescued Paul from every evil deed, and he also rescues us.

3. “Let the Little Children Come to Me” (That the hearer would start to see the child in the community as someone who is important to God, and this suggests something about the way I would treat and love this child.)

Too often we (U. S. culture) are abusing children, perverting children, and abdicating our responsibility to children. I just read a report that some 30 million people are enslaved around the world, a disproportionate number of them children, many born into bondage.

But even closer to home, we see the big yellow busses go by in the morning and afternoon without giving it much thought. Schools are not responsible for the safety, well-being, and nurture of children, I am. Jesus loves children, and he delights in the care of children.

Cain asked “am I my brother’s keeper.” While God certainly is the keeper of my brother, and took vengeance for the blood of Abel which Cain shed, my answer also needs to be “yes.”

God has created a relationship in baptism which goes even deeper than the societal relationships. God has chosen us to be his children, he works through us for the blessing of children. I cannot by myself be the keeper of children, but God empowers my life to be a blessing to the children in my life. I may sometimes have to work hard at this, but I also, with the Apostle Paul can see that my race is run, my fight is fought with Jesus’ strength and support. He carries us in this. He is the one who works inside us to make these changes.

We have to exercise a little caution here. The idea that Jesus loves children and that they are important can easily become a club we use to beat up on people. We also need to proclaim to them that Jesus’ love for those children means he is at work in our hearts, in our hands, and words, for the sake of all people. He offers to help us.

The primary way he helps us do this is by making us all children. Of course we were all children once in our lives, but in our failure before sin, in the gradual decay of our mental and physical faculties, we become much more child-like. God will not let us leave childhood behind, not really. Even if we would say it is not our present reality, it is our future reality and it was our past reality. We have a bond with children and childhood which God has ordained.

But what is more, Jesus has rendered us all helpless, childlike, before our greatest foes. The fact that he has helped and relieved us in our dilemma means that we are also given a true humility, his humility to love and serve those who are on the bottom of life’s rungs, the children who shriek on the neighborhood playground and the octogenarian who babbles like she used to when she was 8 months old.

It is not the service and work which the world values. It still sees these little ones as weak and to some extent worthless, perhaps that is truer for the elders. But this sermon will declare that Jesus does not see as the world sees. He surprised his disciples in this text with his love for people they thought beneath his attention.

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

In a sense, this sermon is the first sermon run backwards. That one has a goal of us being the little children on God’s lap, this one has us remember that we really much more like

Cain than we want to admit and then has us hear God's gracious words to Cain spoken to us in our baptism.

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

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

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

The sermon will want to then address that second conversation which Cain has with God in which God puts a mark on Cain. We don't know what that is, don't go into that. But that God puts a mark on him is similar to what God says about us. In Baptism we put the sign of the holy cross both upon the forehead and upon the heart to mark this one as redeemed by Christ the crucified. That means that we cannot really be killed. Yes, the Romans took the life of Paul, but they did not really take his life. That life was tied up with Jesus on the day Paul was baptized into the death of Christ. Likewise our lives have been tied up with Jesus and we have been marked.

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

Here the preacher may want to move into the Epistle and notice how that affected Paul. Or perhaps the gospel and see Jesus blessing the children. By removing this fear from our lives as well, Jesus has freed us to be something else in this life right now. We are the living invitations to our neighbors to be part and parcel of this kingdom, but this kingdom also takes real and positive shape in our lives. Jesus welcomes the weak and helpless. Paul is fearless before death, fighting the good fight. During WW II the Norwegian Lutheran Bishop, Eivind Berggrav is supposed to have been confronted by an SS interrogator who said, "Don't you realize I can have you killed!?" The Bishop in response simply said, "And what would you do me then?" Dead, he would be out of the

power of the Nazi's, but he was able to face down that evil without fear because he trusted this mark, this sign which God had put upon him in Baptism.