

Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7) June 25

The Sundays immediately after the Feasts of Pentecost and Trinity often bring us back to the very bedrock of our faith. Today the texts seem to revolve around trust. Jeremiah is having a trust crisis in our text. He fears that God has played with him, deceived him, and treated him badly. Jesus sends out the disciples in Matthew 10 with hard warnings of persecution and riven families. But he ends this portion of his discourse with an admonition to trust and not be afraid. God has numbered the very hairs of our heads. He is watching, he cares, and he will do something about it. His help may come in the resurrection from the dead, mind you, but he will do something about it. Jesus asks us to trust and act on his radical message.

We like trust, value it, even go so far as to call it a virtue, but there are limits. We would not want to be found gullible and we all know that the email from Nigeria telling us that millions could be ours if only we would let them wire transfer some funds through our account is a fraud. What is more, our trust is often subtly and dangerously placed in ourselves.

Generally Lutherans are a modest people who want to live comfortable lives. We have our retirement accounts and our comfortable cars. We have a home in the right sort of neighborhood and we are respectable folk who pay our bills and that means we work our jobs. We pay our taxes, vote in the elections, may have served in the military, and support the firemen who raise something for charity every so often. This is a respectable and good life. We trust Jesus, sure, but we also have a pretty good idea of what it takes to get along.

What are the things that are eroding our trust?

- Financial/employment – layoffs don't seem to be based on any company loyalty to the worker.
- Fake news – who can you trust?
- A political landscape that seems to be comprised of people telling me that the other guys are liars.
- An international climate which is seeing a serious realignment after the certainties of the post-WWII era.
- Privacy – is there someone recording and noting every click I make on my web browser?
- Terrorism – can I trust that dark-skinned Arab looking fellow in seat 32b on the plane I just boarded?
- Can I trust that my neighbor down the street is not a predator or some psychopath?

How is God in all these situations calling us and our people to trust?

The readings today which contain all this talk of trust must disquiet us. Jesus seems to be speaking of a radical life which has nothing to do with me. Jeremiah was a prophet, someone who lived long ago. His angst is historically interesting but not really something of today. Jesus warning us about families betraying one another to death and persecutions and fleeing to the neighboring village seems like something we would hear on the news or read about in a paper,

not experience ourselves. That sort of thing happens in places like Syria or Africa, not Iowa and Phoenix.

And thus the preacher has a challenge today. But it is not really the challenge of fitting the texts into our understanding. The preacher's challenge today is fitting our understanding into the text. We do not make these words fit into our world, but our world has to be conformed to this Word of God. The resistance is not one of understanding, but the resistance of people who have turned their comforts into their idols.

The season of the Sundays after Pentecost this year have started us off with difficult messages. Last week it was the will of God, this week an exhortation to trust. The preacher will not shy away from that or will he? Perhaps he will go the comfortable route. Jesus words make us uncomfortable too. The Gospel authentically and accurately proclaimed has gotten more than one preacher in trouble. Such Gospel is unnerving for the folks who are comfortably ensconced in the pews. It won't leave them in their comfort but calls them out of their little boats to daring strolls on the waves, to face down demons, and to lose oneself in a kingdom which is far larger than you might imagine. It has a way of making the preacher uncomfortable too.

Perhaps this is just a spiritual laziness on all our parts. Like many of the people whom my wife sees in the hospital, we are a people who know what we should do, but rarely do it. You need to eat your vegetables and exercise so you can enjoy the parties. Too often we just think like should be cake and punch all the time. What do we, as preachers and congregants, need to focus on? The football coach knows that victories are often won in the weight room over the summer as much as on the field in the fall.

1. Do we need to know Jesus better so we can celebrate his birth?
2. Do we need to do a deep dive into Romans?
3. Prayer – do our people need to learn to pray more, deeper, better? Do they need to be encouraged to start praying?
4. Trust – do we really count on the promises of God? How do we do that? What does that look like?
5. Identity? Do we need to rediscover Justification and the theology of Lutheranism?
6. Do we need to understand worship itself better?
7. More? Something else?

Collect of the Day

O God, because Your abiding presence always goes with us, keep us aware of Your daily mercies that we may live secure and content in Your eternal love; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God's abiding presence always goes with us. It is worth stopping and thinking about that. As I have ministered to a lot of folks in their days of distress, they regularly ask "where is God?"

Famously that question was put to a Lutheran in a concentration camp as the Nazis executed a young man and forced all the prisoners to watch. When the despairing non-Christian threw the question "Where is your God now!?" at the Lutheran, the Lutheran pointed to the young man dangling at the end of a rope as his life was choked out of him and said that Jesus was right there, that young man. He was suffering with us.

The presence of God is not always something to make us comfortable. In our comfort, it is easy to imagine that is just what he does and all he does. But we need to pause and reconsider that. Indeed, he has a way of afflicting the comfortable but comforting the afflicted. To confess the presence of Christ is not to have a God in our control or to have a God who is here to do our bidding.

But I wonder if our people do stop to take this idea seriously if they are all that enthused about God's presence. He can be the uber-NSA in some people's minds. He mines not only my emails and my browsing preferences, he mines my very thoughts and feelings. Do I really want him close? Do I want him that close? The old man certainly does not want him close.

But such worries about God seem to me to be borne out of a flawed or somehow deficient relationship with him. The Christian is quite aware of his or her sinfulness and marvels that God loves us anyway. We have ceased to fear his judgment in one very important sense. His presence is no longer the judge glowering down at me, but the resurrected Jesus who walks with me to Emmaus and opens my mind to perceive new things, setting my heart on fire. Ever had your heart set on fire? Was it comfortable? Jesus was uncomfortable for the disciples, but he was not unwelcome either.

The prayer wants that present God to make us aware of his daily mercies so we can live secure and content in His eternal love. Security and contentment are ideals for which we strive and often find that the striving for security renders us terribly malcontent. We work so hard to build that nest egg that we find ourselves rich and empty. Have we located our security in possessions?

One might also play with the idea that our national security is tenuous. The events transpiring in the rest of the world this past week surely have to be unsettling. But the week before it was Ukraine, and before that Afghanistan. Security is an eternal quest in this life and it appears that the only one who truly sleeps soundly is the fellow who rests under a tombstone.

The prayer offers us the hope and the promise that a real security, a true security is to be found in the merciful presence of God. How will we proclaim that today in a way that doesn't sound like so much platitude and emptiness to a people who are insecure and discontent?

Our Lutheran theology is particularly well endowed with language to talk about the abiding presence of God. Jesus in the manger was not spectacular and our sacramental and incarnational language allows us to see God in the mundane and the simple. That in turn allows us to see the daily mercies of God in the friendships, the acts of kindness, the words of

encouragement, and all the other blessings. This prayer is predicated upon the doctrine of vocation and the sacramental presence of Christ.

Readings

Jeremiah 20:7-13 Our reading today is a lament by Jeremiah, but the occasion of his lament is found in the verses immediately prior, thus I have included them. The verses which follow take Jeremiah's complaint a step further, a disturbing step further as Jeremiah curses the very day of his birth. The preacher needs to be aware of both of these things.

¹ Now Pashhur the priest, the son of Immer, who was chief officer in the house of the LORD, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. ² Then Pashhur beat Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the LORD. ³ The next day, when Pashhur released Jeremiah from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, "The LORD does not call your name Pashhur, but Terror on Every Side. ⁴ For thus says the LORD: Behold, I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends. They shall fall by the sword of their enemies while you look on. And I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon. He shall carry them captive to Babylon, and shall strike them down with the sword. ⁵ Moreover, I will give all the wealth of the city, all its gains, all its prized belongings, and all the treasures of the kings of Judah into the hand of their enemies, who shall plunder them and seize them and carry them to Babylon. ⁶ And you, Pashhur, and all who dwell in your house, shall go into captivity. To Babylon you shall go, and there you shall die, and there you shall be buried, you and all your friends, to whom you have prophesied falsely."

⁷ O LORD, you have deceived me,
and I was deceived;
you are stronger than I,
and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all the day;
everyone mocks me.

⁸ For whenever I speak, I cry out,
I shout, "Violence and destruction!"
For the word of the LORD has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.

⁹ If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.

¹⁰ For I hear many whispering.
Terror is on every side!
"Denounce him! Let us denounce him!"

say all my close friends,
 watching for my fall.
 “Perhaps he will be deceived;
 then we can overcome him
 and take our revenge on him.”
¹¹ But the LORD is with me as a dread warrior;
 therefore my persecutors will stumble;
 they will not overcome me.
 They will be greatly shamed,
 for they will not succeed.
 Their eternal dishonor
 will never be forgotten.
¹² O LORD of hosts, who tests the righteous,
 who sees the heart and the mind,
 let me see your vengeance upon them,
 for to you have I committed my cause.
¹³ Sing to the LORD;
 praise the LORD!
 For he has delivered the life of the needy
 from the hand of evildoers.
¹⁴ *Cursed be the day
 on which I was born!
 The day when my mother bore me,
 let it not be blessed!*
¹⁵ *Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father,
 “A son is born to you,”
 making him very glad.*
¹⁶ *Let that man be like the cities
 that the LORD overthrew without pity;
 let him hear a cry in the morning
 and an alarm at noon,
¹⁷ because he did not kill me in the womb;
 so my mother would have been my grave,
 and her womb forever great.*
¹⁸ *Why did I come out from the womb
 to see toil and sorrow,
 and spend my days in shame?*

*One really has to have some compassion for poor Jeremiah. He could not win. These are after
 all the words of a man who just got out of the stocks. It appears that he was the descendent of Eli*

and lived under that curse. If you remember from the opening chapters of I Samuel that the priest Eli had been cursed by God. His descendants would die young and leave weeping orphaned children. This plays out in a number of scenes throughout the reign of David and into the reign of Solomon. King Solomon finally has enough of these guys who have consistently backed the wrong candidate and made a misstep at every juncture. He banished them to Anathoth, a small village outside of Jerusalem. Jeremiah is a priest of Anathoth, a man living under Eli's curse.

But Jeremiah's early career hardly seemed cursed. He had risen to considerable prominence. Jeremiah had been an advisor to King Josiah and had helped him orchestrate his reforms in the last days of the 7th century BC. But when this text transpires Josiah was dead and Jeremiah's counsel was no longer welcome in the palace of Josiah's sons. God sent him again and again with a difficult word for the king and citizens of Jerusalem. The sins of the people were too great. The Babylonians would come and lay waste the land, destroy the temple, cart off the populace into a bitter exile, and only a remnant would remain. As you can imagine this did not endear him to the kings or the people.

Like Cassandra in Troy, Jeremiah would not be recognized as a prophet until after the terrors had taken place. Until then he was a pariah, unwelcome in every social gathering, spurned and ignored.

He was naturally frustrated. In the narrative we read prior to his complaint today, a false prophet/priest named Pashhur has him arrested and publicly humiliated, placing in what our translation calls "stocks" but we are not sure exactly what this was. In any event it was humiliating.

I find that what transpires next is what makes Jeremiah so valuable to us as Christians and almost unique in world religions. After this episode, perhaps while he is confined in these stocks, Jeremiah takes his complaints and his negative feelings to God. He raises his profound disappointment in God with God. Imagine Jeremiah speaking these words while he is bound hand and foot in some public square while people spit and hurl insults at him. He does not psychologically suppress it in the name of faith. He does not simply submit to the will of God. He does not resign himself to the cruel reality that the wheel of history sometimes crushes us. He gets angry. He accuses God of deceiving him, cheating him, lying to him. He counted on God's promises and feels like God has let him down and he is going to let God know about this.

Perhaps what is amazing to the faithful reader is that Jeremiah doesn't get fished for this. In fact, one gets the nature of God revealed most beautifully in God's response to his angry creature. God loves him and gently restores him. God can take our anger, more than that, he invites all our emotions to be brought to him. Indeed, Jeremiah's cursed life becomes a foreshadowing, a prophecy in itself of the one who bore the curse for us on a tree. Jeremiah's lament becomes a strange forward echo of Jesus' own words on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jeremiah's depiction of his plight is specific and eerily reminiscent of Jesus. His best friends have turned against him, Judas-like. He is completely alone, abandoned by those who love him, like disciples fleeing from a garden. His prophetic message is the problem, as Jesus own message was really what got him killed. When he tries to bottle it up, his bones are on fire, he is compelled to preach. Jesus knows full well what awaits him in Jerusalem, yet compelled by the ardor of his love he goes anyway. When Jeremiah speaks, he is hated. He cannot win.

He closes out the reading with an affirmation of his trust in God. He looks forward to the day when God will vindicate him and shame his enemies. He sings to the one who delivers him.

But if you keep reading in this chapter you find that Jeremiah immediately returns to his somber theme. He curses the day of his birth. Wishes that he had died in the womb and regrets the day that someone sent out his birth announcements. Faith in God does not automatically make the feelings get better. Christians struggle with depression. Just because we have faith does not mean that we always feel good or that we have somehow banished these sorts of thoughts. Are we ready to say that to our people?

If you want to address a topic which is almost never heard from the pulpit consider mental illness. The abiding presence of God is for the mentally ill as well. Jeremiah in vss 14ff looks to us like someone for whom we would be calling 911 or shipping them off to the psych ward of the local hospital. He sounds like he might take his own life. His words, in the prior verses have ascended to faithful heights, but he appears himself to have remained in the basement of mental illness and despair. God stayed down there with him – he abided with Jeremiah his whole life, even when he did not have the happy thoughts which some imagine are the only right thoughts for Christians to have.

There is a moralism which dominates much of protestant thinking. We imagine that Christians can only have happy thoughts, that to have the love of God means we should always be cheerful and bubbly. But the reality is that Christians, real Christians, are just as prone to depression and mental health problems as anyone else. That does not make them less Christian! It is a very shallow theology which insists that we have to be happy. Luther went through great periods of depression.

How often are we not forced into a sort of façade when we come to church? We put on a mask of perfection, our family is just so, our marriage is stress free. We imagine that God and others are watching and if they knew what was really happening in our homes or our lives that they would no longer love us. It is fake and inauthentic, but it too is very human. God invites us to be totally honest with him. He already knows it, but like Adam hiding in the garden, we hear an invitation to him to step out from behind the bush behind which we are hiding. He knows right where we are. He invites us, he does not force us out. This text could be a call out of our hypocrisy and hiding to be absolutely real with God. God asks Adam what he has done, not because he needs information, but because Adam needs to say it. So God makes that possible without making it a confrontation or an accusation, he just asks, “what have you done?”

Psalm 91:1-10

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

² I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust.”

³ For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence.

⁴ He will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

⁵ You will not fear the terror of the night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,

⁶ nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

⁷ A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.

⁸ You will only look with your eyes
and see the recompense of the wicked.

⁹ Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—
the Most High, who is my refuge—

¹⁰ no evil shall be allowed to befall you,
no plague come near your tent.

The psalm perhaps is the promise that Jeremiah refers to as the deceit of God. For one suffering in Jeremiah’s situation this must have sounded hollow. How many times do the things we believe are such good news are in fact heard as bitter messages by those to whom we preach? We preach God’s love for mothers on Mother’s Day, but how does the woman who has lost a child hear that message. Jeremiah heard promises like this and railed against God. The OT seems to tell us that this is OK. God would that we bring all our emotions to him, not just the happy and the pleasant love and joy.

The psalm itself is a deep song which expresses the trust the author has in God. No foe, not even thousands and ten thousands arrayed against him can harm him, for God is on his side. God has spread his wings over him, God is the fortress and the strength of the believer. The arrow that flies by day or the pestilence that stalks by night will not harm the one who trusts in the Almighty.

What is very interesting is that if you keep reading in the psalm, this is the very quote which Satan uses against Jesus at the temptation when he urges Jesus to jump from the temple, for “he will command his holy angels lest you dash your foot against a stone.” Jesus of course has a different interpretation of that text and will trust God in a way the evil one cannot fathom.

Romans 6:12-23

¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Good commentary on Romans: “The Story of Romans” by Katherine Grieb published by Westminster/John Knox Press (2002) Grieb looks at the OT narratives that are lying behind the text of Paul’s book and helps us see the argument more clearly.

Another recommendation was the People’s Commentary by CPH.

Luke Johnson’s “Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary” published by Smyth and Helwys, 2013 is another worth checking out. I must admit I have not read this one yet.

If you want another good read for the summer, I recommend Hans Schwartz’s “The Christian Faith” published by Baker Publishing in 2014. Schwartz is a Lutheran theologian from Germany. His introduction on the theology of Luther is particularly clear and his summary of the 5th through 8th chapters of Romans was also very good.

If you go reading about in the commentaries, you are likely to discover that this part of Paul’s letter to the Romans is a diatribe. But be aware that the ancients used that word differently than

we do. For us it is a negative thing, in the ancient world it was rhetorical device which involved an imagined conversation with the questioning audience of the speaker/author. Paul starts talking to someone here. He imagines he is talking to someone who is challenging or asking tough questions. It is a rhetorical technique. Commentators love to use words like diatribe. They are indeed helpful, but if you don't know the term, this one can be misleading.

One of the great things that Martin Luther did for us was he brought the humanities into the study of Scripture. In the medieval tradition commentaries practiced division, each section was divided into smaller and smaller pieces until it was atomized and each word had become isolated from the words nearby. Luther and particularly Melancthon reunited the "argument" of Paul's letter. Indeed, his commentaries and those of his peers started out with a summary or restatement of the argument of the letters. Then the comments would explicate that reading of the individual elements of the text.

Our problem here is that we are picking up in the middle of the argument and the preacher needs to know what happened earlier. Paul has been explaining his ministry and message by expounding on the Gospel. In chapter 3 he summarized it with his famous section which begins at verse 21 and concludes at verse 27. Salvation is a gift, apprehended through faith. In chapter 4 he makes a textual argument and illustration of Abraham who was reckoned right before God before he was circumcised. Chapter 5 is the fuller explication of the main point. You heard that last week.

Here in chapter six Paul starts talking to his imaginary interlocutor who is asking questions. Earlier in the chapter the questioner wondered if since God forgives sins, let's sin more and get more forgiveness. Paul's answer that is that since we were baptized into Christ, our very nature has changed. We are no longer those old sinner.

Our pericope picks up with his concluding paragraph of that first question. We do not present our bodies for sinful purposes. That is just not who we are since our baptism. We present ourselves to God as people who have been redeemed. Sin no longer has its dominion over us.

In the second paragraph of our text Paul's questioner asks another similar question. Since we are no longer under the law but grace we can sin with impunity. Grace is a license to do whatever we want. "By no means!" thunders Paul. His argument is two-fold. First of all you are a slave of the one you serve. If you serve sin, you are once more a slave to it. If you serve righteousness, and God is righteousness itself, we are his slave. Notice, that absolute freedom is just not one of the options. You are going to serve someone or something.

Serving God is the better service because it leads to life and holiness (sanctification). Serving sin feels like a sort of freedom, we are indeed free from the strictures of righteousness, but it leads to death and damnation. Paul is essentially comparing benefits packages here and noting that the benefits for the slaves of God are much better than the benefits for the slaves of sin.

What is amazing, in Paul's eyes, is that we get to choose our slavery. When were slaves to sin, we had no option. We were stuck. Baptism has opened up options for us. We can run back to that

old slavery, it is true. Baptism is not a constraint, but it is a liberation to serve God. We can turn our back on that service and return to the old service. But we won't like that. Paul is pretty sure. Contrary to the arguments of some parents who want to "wait until they can make their own decision," we should be baptizing infants so they have a choice.

So how does this preach? We have lots of folks who feel like their lives are out of their control. They are under the influence of "forces" which often govern them, enslave them. Addictions are only the most obvious example and you may not want to use that. A mortgage that forces us to work a job we hate, a bad childhood that we can blame for our poor relational skills, psychoses that render us unaccountable for our actions, or pain that simply makes us crabby – so cut me some slack!

Unfortunately Paul uses the imagery of slavery here. Since the great abolitionist movement of the mid 19th century, we have had a visceral rejection of slavery woven into our culture. We have embraced liberty and freedom as virtues. One has to remember that at the time of Paul some 25% or more of the population were slaves. It was not a career which one sought, but it was also not something which was always and especially shameful. It is true that many slaves were terribly treated, but others were not. Slavery was not racial, but economic. Bankruptcy could result in you and your family being sold into slavery. Lots of people you saw on the street were slaves.

This makes this a challenge for us as preachers, but I think we would do well just take the bull by the horns and use the term. Call our people slaves. They are slaves of something. Baptism has given them the chance to be slaves of God, a much preferable slavery.

Matthew 10:5a, 21-33 *The omitted verses are included in italics*

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, *"Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans,* ⁶ *but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.* ⁷ *And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.'* ⁸ *Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay.* ⁹ *Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts,* ¹⁰ *no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff, for the laborer deserves his food.* ¹¹ *And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart.* ¹² *As you enter the house, greet it.* ¹³ *And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.* ¹⁴ *And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town.* ¹⁵ *Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.*

¹⁶ *"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.* ¹⁷ *Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues,* ¹⁸ *and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.* ¹⁹ *When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to*

speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. ²⁰ *For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.* ²¹ Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, ²² and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ²³ When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

²⁴ “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵ It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household?

²⁶ “So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. ²⁷ What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. ²⁸ And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. ³² So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, ³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

Jesus clearly needs to learn a few things about motivational speakers. Perhaps he should get some recordings of those old tapes by Zig Zigler or another motivational speaker. I heard Arnold Schwarzenegger is making the circuit these days as a motivational speaker. How can Jesus say these things? Well, of course, he is Jesus and gets to say whatever he wants and it is our job to listen to him, as painful as that might be.

Jesus paints a picture of what is in store for his disciples which is not pretty. It will divide families, violently. There will be persecution and the disciples don't fight back. They run to the next town. They will be hated for the sake of Jesus' name.

We thought Jeremiah's words on vengeance were important here. Jesus seems to intimate it, but Jeremiah is clear. God will exact vengeance. This is not a game in which the evil characters get away with it. God does set things right, in his time, in his way. Jeremiah prays that he gets to see that day, but he counts on that happening. Jesus turns this into a positive. God sees the witness-bearing Christian who testifies to Jesus. He does not forget. That will be terribly important one day, when judgment is rendered and heaven and hell are populated. How important is that scale balancing to our parishioners? How important should it be? The OT community counted on God's vengeance. Should we too? Are we more comfortable with the term punishment? How is that different?

But that should actually be expected. Jesus himself was hated. We are not above the master. Christians should not really be surprised at persecution and these sorts of things. His own family tried to have him committed as a lunatic. Disciples will encounter similar things.

In the final paragraph Jesus exhorts his disciples to broadcast what he has said quietly, and not to worry about this. God is watching us. He watches every sparrow and has numbered the hairs on our head. Those who acknowledge Jesus before people will be acknowledged by Jesus before his Father in heaven. Alas, the one who denies Jesus, will be denied. Sounds like works righteousness to me! What are we going to make of this?

*First of all the preacher needs to be aware that our current idolatry, and every age has its peculiar idolatries, would make Jesus into the sort of God who approves of comfortable suburbanites. We have sanitized much of what he has said and especially the Bible of the Old Testament which he referred to as “scripture” whenever he referenced it. We don’t read those tough parts and even this will likely get a gloss in most parishes this weekend. We will make sure that Jesus is not really telling us to do something dangerous, radical, risky, or which otherwise would ask too much of us. But this is a mistake. Jesus is not here to make us comfortable and if we are to listen to what he says, we should be prepared to be downright uncomfortable. *It should be remembered that Matthew’s audience of the first century was likely enduring a kind of persecution from their fellow Jewish family members, but those who had not adopted the Christian faith.**

Secondly, Jesus did not come to pat us on the head for trying hard. He came to kill us and make us alive again. We may think that our family is surely good enough for heaven, but it is not. Even the sweet love of an elderly couple is not truly heaven worthy. It must be undone, taken apart, sanctified, and reassembled by Christ for it to be fit for heaven. Our best marriage may last a the decades of a human life, but heaven is a lot longer than that.

Thirdly, Christianity is not a fast track to an easy life. I don’t know where people get the idea that because they serve Jesus things are supposed to go swimmingly. It seems a little odd to me. After all, in passages like this one and numerous other places Jesus has been pretty up front with us. Being a Christian is not easy. As one great confirmation sermon once said it, “So you’re a Christian now; I sure hope you look good on wood!”

But what is the sermon for our folks here. We could inoculate them against the idea that Christians don’t suffer. Jesus tells them to expect it. Such a sermon would plant the seed so that when times of trial and tribulation come they will not be overwhelmed by it but may in fact remember that this is just part of the package.

But I think Jesus’ words actually speak to another issue here and that is the functional deism which operates in most post-enlightenment societies. By deist, I mean someone who holds that there is a God, they certainly believe that Jesus was God, he walked on the sea, healed the sick, even rose from the dead. But that happened a long time ago, half the world away. Jesus has risen up to heaven and is watching us, but not involved, not really involved in our little lives. This view is only partially Christian and it misses a very important part of Christianity: Jesus loves us today. He is just as involved in our lives as he was in the lives of the people of the first century in Galilee, indeed, I would say he is more involved. After all if you lived in a village through which Jesus did not pass, would you have known it?

So what do we say to our folks today?

- 1. Some are feeling persecuted by a culture which is urging us to be quiet, to keep our ideas about morality and virtue safely behind the closed doors of our churches and off the streets. Does Jesus challenge us to confidence and trust in the face of this persecution?*
- 2. Jesus is saying that he has numbered the hairs on our head. He counts us far more valuable than the swallows. The final judgment of the world will be based on how the world has treated us (Matt. 25). God will remember everything that has happened to us. We are that important to him. If we are unjustly killed, he will settle that score. This is not a promise that God will keep nasty things from us, but it is a promise that our death, our suffering, our persecution will never go unnoticed by him.*
- 3. The presence of God is for us. He comes always in grace and love toward us. The old man loathes the presence of God, but the new man (Rom. 7) loves the presence of God. (see Epistle reading!)*
- 4. Our suffering unites us to Christ – don't be afraid of it. The disciple is like the teacher, the servant like the master. He suffered, was defamed, and was cruelly treated. You may be as well, and when you do, you are like your master/teacher.*
- 5. There is an end point to all this. This is not an eternal cycle of random suffering and woe. Before they go through all the towns of Israel He will come.*

Law and Gospel

1. God makes beautiful promises to me, but sometimes they are very hard to see. God says that he will protect me and cause me to prosper, but I am not seeing that. My bills always seem to be one step ahead of my income. My life does not simply roll from one success to another. What am I to do with these promises of God? Trust them. But how will I do that? God will help me here. God is not afraid or put off by my failure to trust him and see his promises. He knows they are hard. He has hung on a cross and wondered where God is too.
2. Sometimes trusting God makes it worse. Jeremiah did what God said, trusted him, and got put through a meat-grinder. His obedience and service did not result in praise and acceptance, but betrayal and terror. But what I see as only black, God often turns to his purposes. Jeremiah's terrible message about an exile would purify the people of God. It would be painful and brutal, but from that experience would come a people who were devoted to God. Even Jeremiah himself, through all his suffering, would articulate the very Messiah for whom he longed.
3. I often feel out of control. There are forces within me and outside of me which dictate my life. I am trapped by them and seem helpless before them. Economic, emotional, government, and societal forces, addictions and psychoses and much more. But God has set me free in baptism, free to be enslaved to another force in my life, a force which serves righteousness. This force is potent, it is real, and it offers me a completely different life to live. It is not safe, it is not even considered sane by many, but it is Jesus.

4. Jesus calls me to a life which does not seem like something I want to do. I like my family. I want to have good relationships with them. I am not looking for trouble. I just want to go to work and do my job, pay my bills, and fit in. Jesus calls me to be some sort of a counter-cultural oddball who is going to get picked on. That terrifies me. It should terrify me. And Jesus tells me that God is concerned about me too. I may walk into the den of lions but he promises me that nothing will escape God's notice there. He doesn't promise me that I will become a lion tamer, I might be lunch, but the God who raises the dead will see. Trust that, he urges me.

Sermon Ideas

1. God wants it all *or Give it all to God* (OT - That the Holy Spirit of God would engender in the hearer the trust and faith which freely, frankly, and wholly approaches God with every part of the human life, even the parts which we find distasteful or disturbing.)

It is just as much an act of worship to bring our anger and negative emotions to God as it is to bring our praise and joy. I am not saying we gin up some anger today, but when it is there, bring it to God as an act of worship.

This is a strange sermon in some respects, because it really almost invites people to be angry with God. We will listen to Jeremiah's life as much as we would listen to his words. The text is disturbing to us. Nice people don't talk to God this way. This is not the sort of prayer that my Sunday School teacher taught me to say. But there is also something really important in that. First and foremost, here it is in the Bible. What is it doing here?

Luther enjoins us to pray in the introduction to the Lord's Prayer to pray "like dear children ask their dear father." I know that my children don't only bring their happiness to me. Indeed, it seems like get a strong dose of complaining from a certain 15 year old in my life these days. Sometimes I get more than complaining, I get some angst.

Earlier in the notes we address the possibilities for proclaiming the issue of mental health and mental illness. We are not always happy in this life and that does not mean that we are not Christian, or that we have a problem. Just because God loves us does not mean that our lives always go well or that we feel good all the time. Luther is a great example of that.

The beauty of Jeremiah for us is that he does this inside his relationship with God, inside his faith. God does not turn him away, shut him off for his impudence, or zap him with a lightning bolt for his hubris. Indeed, God embraces Jeremiah. Jeremiah's book becomes one of the great testimonies to Jesus. Jeremiah himself will look a great deal like Jesus who cries out in his anguish on the cross that God has forsaken him.

The preacher will want to give his people permission to bring every feeling to God, every emotion, and every part of our lives. He will forgive the sins. He has already born the pain. He welcomes the opportunity to be part of your whole life.

The law here is that we often think that somehow God's love would run out if we talked this way to him. It won't. The law here is that we imagine that we need to protect God from this sort of behavior or that such behavior is not proper for the Christian. We imagine that Christians don't have thoughts like that, they don't have feelings like that. But they do. Jeremiah did.

The preacher will want to be clear. We are not required to have such feelings. But such feelings are not a sign of a lack of faith. Indeed, being angry with God, being disappointed by him suggests a deep faith. One cannot be disappointed in the one whom one does not love and trust. Never having these feelings is not always or only a sign of strong faith, it might also be a sign that we just don't expect much from God.

But what is the Gospel here? First of all the Gospel is that God wants this sort of communication from us. He is not afraid of what you will say nor is he even surprised by it. He has numbered the hairs on your head, knows you better than you know yourself. You cannot really hide this from him, he wants you talk to him about it.

But the Gospel goes on. This relationship which he establishes with us is a place where these feelings and situations belong. [It is not the case that we are allowed to be angry and God tolerates this. God genuinely wants us to be in this sort of relationship which includes the whole person.](#) Not only is he able to handle it, he does something about it. Jeremiah would feel this way a lot. Perhaps today we would diagnose him with something. But for all his angst, Jeremiah became a prophet of God's Word to his people. He was protected and rescued by God time and again. From his final place of exile in Egypt he wrote beautiful letters to the exiles, filled with hope. God did not leave Jeremiah in this place. The resurrection of Christ is God's promise to us that he does not leave us in this place.

2. Slaves to Righteousness (Epistle – That God would remind the hearer of the freedom which he bestowed in Baptism and enable the hearer to act on it.)

We don't like to be called a slave. It is something of a slur, but Paul notices something about us. We are always slaves to something. Some are slaves to their appetites, others are slaves to their fears. Many of our folks are fighting their weight – do they feel enslaved to their own hunger, their eating habits? Some are slaves to their insecurities and other are slaves to their sense of security. There are all sorts of people and forces out there which would enslave us. They would demand we serve them and promise us something in return. It is always fascinating to me just how cheaply we sell ourselves into such slavery. The man who sells himself to the slavery of his physical appetites earns

pleasure of a sort, but so many attendant problems as he over-eats and contracts all the diseases and problems attendant upon such a life.

This sermon proclaims that Baptism has liberated us to another sort of slavery, but this slavery is slavery to righteousness. Now a slave is compelled, and this righteousness compels us. We will want to understand that as well as we can. What drives the people whom we see doing the amazing things in our midst? What is their compulsion to volunteer at the local school, foodbank, or other agency where they do so many good things? What is going on there? Paul would see a slave to righteousness.

Paul speaks of Baptism, our Baptism, really doing something to us. It is not just a little rite we do to babies which we promptly forget. It is not just a Christening where a name is given; although, that happens too. Baptism is a complete change of the person. It happened to all of us who were baptized. But the nature of God's great love is that he is not going to force that change on us. So Paul exhorts and we do too. We can turn back to that old enslavement which lead to death. God will love us no less for it. The promise of Baptism of heaven and eternal life still stands unless we would throw that away. But Paul also speaks of Baptismal change which transforms the life of the hearer. It is not a one time deal, but a daily thing. Did you put back on the shackles of your slavery yesterday or today already? Baptism today breaks that old yoke today and replaces it with a yoke which Jesus says is easy and light. (Matthew 11:28-30) Baptism offers you this enslavement which leads to sanctification and eternal life.

If you have a copy of John Nordling's "Philemon" commentary in the Concordia Commentary series, he has an excellent section in the introduction on slavery.

Paul is a moral optimist in this section of his letter. He really thinks that we can be obedient to righteousness. Lutherans can be critiques for being moral pessimists who always imagine that we cannot do true good. This is not accurate. Luther's catechism does not talk about us that way. Read the commandments and you will hear in each of them Luther's explanation of what we ought not to do and what it looks like when we keep this commandment. He does this because God's gift of the Holy Spirit is real. It means that we can serve the righteous demands of God. We may not do it perfectly, but that is not what he is addressing yet, he will in chapter 7, but for now, he is talking about an enslavement to a righteous demand.

3. He has numbered the hairs of your head (Gospel – That the hearer would delight in the active and loving presence of God in his/her daily life.)

This sermon has in mind the deism we mention above. The idea that God is out there somewhere far away is persistent, even in church going folk. We will argue vehemently that Jesus walked on water and did the miracles our Bibles tell us about, but we cannot actually point to a single thing he has done lately in our lives. Jesus is for the first

century, he will be for the last day, but the 2000 plus years between those days are marked by the real absence of Christ.

But Jesus has other words for his disciples of the first century and the disciples of the 21st century. His words did indeed describe the lives those men would lead. They were persecuted and harassed. Only one of them, John, apparently died a natural death. The rest of them were martyred, if the legends are true, quite gruesomely. Peter was crucified upside down. Paul beheaded. They were sometimes chased from town to town. They were reviled and hated. [These things were happening as Matthew wrote this gospel account. Those things are happening to varying degrees in the world in which we live too. Our people may well be afraid of this. And they may have very good reason to feel that fear.](#)

We know that as the centuries progressed, at times Christians in every century have faced this sort of persecution and even in our own times there are reports of terrible atrocities in parts of the world where Christians are persecuted today.

Jesus tells those disciples and us something. Nothing happens to us but that God knows about it. He has numbered the hairs of our heads, he cares that deeply about us. He delights in us.

That does not mean Christians get to fly first class while the unbelievers suffer the woes of coach. Jesus meant it that his disciples would suffer and do not think that our lives will somehow be free of suffering either. But our lives, every moment of them, every facet of them are on God's radar and he is actively engaged in them.

[It also means that God will be the one who settles this score and balances this scale. I don't need to. Jeremiah committed his cause to the LORD and hoped that he got to see the day of God's vengeance. Jesus tells us that nothing will happen to us but God will notice. Kindness and cruelty will not pass unheeded by God. It may feel that way as we go through life, but God will not let this be unnoted. He has a really good memory for how people treat his sheep.](#)

The preacher will want to have some illustrations of this. I remember praying about a project at church and walking out the door and finding the prayer answered. I remember being afraid and alone and suddenly, out of the blue, came a call from an old friend. I remember... you get the point. The idea here is not to posit that God is up in heaven watching the story of your life unfold while he munches on celestial popcorn and you are suffering. God's numbering of the hairs on our heads means he is involved, right now. [It doesn't always mean things go our way. Sometimes it means he walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death!](#)

