

## Trinity IV

**Luther** (*The House Postils of Luther contain no less than three wonderful treatments of this passage in Vol. 2. I encourage you to read them all.*)

2. Now everyone knows quite well that the term “merciful” describes a person who is ready to sympathize with his fellowman, a person who is kind and friendly toward his fellowman and so genuinely concerned about his needs and misfortunes of soul and body, reputation and property, that he tries to think of ways in which he might be able to help his fellowman, and prove his concerns by his deeds, doing them joyfully and gladly. That is what “being merciful” means. But he pointedly says, “as your Father also is merciful.” With this assertion Jesus distinguishes between the mercy of a Christian and the mercy of non-Christians and wicked people who live in their midst. Sinners and tax collectors, who are mentioned shortly in this Gospel, also practice mercy toward one another. They love one another, do friendly favors for one another, lend to one another; but they always do it with the expectation that this favor will be returned. That is a hoodlum’s mercy, done with the hope of having that favor – or an even greater one – returned. Mercenary soldiers are murderers and insolent rascals, but they, too, practice mercy toward one another. The same is true of whores, rogues, and robbers. Even street gangs practice a certain kind of mercy, but their mercy extends only to their own group, and lasts only as long as their mutual criminal activities.

3. Christian mercy, however, is modeled after the mercy of our heavenly Father. A thief is not merciful to someone who is not a fellow thief, but only to his companions in theft. He might not even steal, if his buddies weren’t helping and egging him on. That is a thieving, hypocrite’s mercy. This also applies to our homes. If one of the family members is always making excuses for other family members, or if the members consistently cover up for a member who is not doing his share of work, that too is a hypocritical kind of mercy. As Christians, however, we are to be merciful in the same way our Father in heaven is merciful, not merely to those who are our friends, nor merely to those who are fellow wrongdoers. That, too, is a hypocritical kind of mercy, yes, a devilish mercy. If we want to be Christians, we must be merciful in the same way our heavenly Father is merciful, not merely to our friends, nor only to those engaged in wrongdoing, but to everyone. That includes those whom we dislike, those who dislike and persecute us, people of whom we think: They are not worth so much as a civil greeting. We know from experience how hard that is. Let’s be honest; don’t we say, Why should I be concerned about that rascal? He’s done thus and so to me; so far as I’m concerned, he doesn’t deserve to live; if it were up to me; I’d let the lice and worms destroy him. That is how our natural self always inclines us to a hypocritical mercy which extends only to our compatriots in wrongdoing, but wants nothing to do with other people.

4. That is not what I mean, says Christ. What I mean is this: even though your fellowman has wronged you, if you want to be a Christian, you must be merciful, in harmony with the example

your heavenly Father has set. If you don't, you cannot be either the children or the brother of him who with his blood has redeemed you from sin and death. The truth of the matter is that you have committed every kind of crime against your God and Father in heaven, and you've broken every one of his commandments, so that he would be fully justified in saying, Why should I sacrifice my Son for such hopeless rebels? I should let them go to the devil in the abyss of hell, for they don't fear, love, or trust in me. What's more, they despise, blaspheme, and hate me; they swear and curse by my name; they persecute and damn my word; they disobey their parents and rulers; they are murderers, adulterers, and greedy thieves who charge exorbitant interest rates and commit perjury. In short, they commit every evil you can name. Therefore, let them go to hell, where they belong. Christ is saying that is what God could say to you, but he doesn't do that. Instead, despite your wickedness, he is good and gracious. He provides not only body and life, food and drink, wife and child, everything you need for this present life, but to top it all off, he gives you his Son and eternal life.

*(Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils Vol 2. Ed.: Eugene Klug. Baker, 1996. Pp. 258-268)*

### **Collect of the Day**

O Lord, grant that the course of this world may be so peaceably ordered by Your governance that Your Church may joyfully serve You in all godly quietness, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*Does it seem like this prayer is especially pertinent for this time? Our world seems to be an increasingly chaotic and dangerous place. Some of that is just because media and technology have brought violence so immediately to our lives. We used to read three day old reports of violence in other countries in our newspapers, no photos. Now someone is live-streaming the events as they are happening and we see them in all their graphic horror in our own homes.*

*But some of this is also just real. My daughter's friend from high school came by the other day. He is a refugee from Afghanistan. His cousin's leg was blown off by a car bomb last week. That is a violent world which makes our hardships seem pretty trivial.*

*But here is the odd thing. We have lived in a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity in North America for the last century. How has the church used that opportunity? We have sent missionaries all over the world, it is true. But look at our own churches. Our members are wealthier than ever, but they give less and less. And with reason. We have fought with one another, built our personal kingdoms, and paid attention to everything but the mission of Christ's kingdom. The North American Church, not just the LCMS, is in serious decline, both in terms of worshipping attendance and offerings. My father, whose long ministry began in the high point of post-war Christianity and concluded in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, often said that what we really needed was a major disruption like the Great Depression. I don't know if he was right or not, but it was a hard statement to refute.*

*Perhaps the goal of the prayer is not peaceable governance but the joyful and quiet service of the Church. That can happen in times of great societal disruption and in times of what the world defines as peace. We tend to think that the peaceable governance of the world means that it is comfortable. I am not sure of that anymore. I would like to ministry joyfully and quietly in times which feel peaceful to me. But God may well be willing to sacrifice my comfort for the sake of that joyful and quiet service of his people.*

## **Readings**

Genesis 50:15-21

<sup>15</sup> When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." <sup>16</sup> So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: <sup>17</sup> 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup> His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." <sup>19</sup> But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. <sup>21</sup> So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

*I find this to be one of the most poignant stories in the Bible. Joseph was virtually murdered by his brothers. They sold him into slavery. While they might not have actually wielded the knife, it was as good as killing a young man to send him to Egypt to be such a slave. But Joseph of course did not die, God was with him and eventually his brothers did indeed bow down to him and he did lord it over them. But back in chapter 45 of Genesis, when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, he did in fact forgive them then. He bade them not to worry or be angry with themselves. God had turned it all out for good so many lives were saved. Joseph would bear no grudge.*

*Yet here they are, sometime later, after their father Jacob's death, and they have not really ever believed Joseph's words of forgiveness. They come, fearful, begging and groveling to save their lives from the wrath of a man who had long since given it up. Joseph weeps when he hears this from his brother. All those years of his kindness and generosity to them were now seen to have been received with suspicion and fear. There is little pain greater than having one's forgiveness disbelieved. You want to restore the relationship, you bear no grudge, you truly love the other, but they will not have it. They cannot believe that your forgiveness is big enough for them. They must pay off a debt which you have forgotten about and which you don't even want to collect on.*

*There are a couple of things which jump out at one when reading this passage. This is really the thematic passage of the whole book. The story of humanity cast out of the Garden of Eden had begun with Cain's murder of Abel, a terrible sin, a fratricide, one of the most unimaginable evils,*

*brother slays brother. The book revisits sibling rivalry in the story of Isaac and Ishmael and again in the stories of Jacob and Esau. Remember when Esau forgives Jacob in chapter 33? The book ends with a brother forgiving his brothers for his virtual murder. They had treated him as if he did not matter, as if his life could be reduced to a handful of coins, an annoyance to be cast away.*

*In terms of forgiveness, this text also suggests that forgiveness is a process; it is not a once and done sort of event. As much as the engineer in us would like to find a solution which would allow us to check off box and be done with the whole sin problem, the reality is that we are talking about people here. They will need to be reassured and comforted. This is good because this is really the reason we get to preach every week. One cannot simply conduct a ministry by referencing your first sermon every Sunday, as if one could preach the Gospel once and be done with it. It is a constant process of reminding and remembering. (I love that word “remember.” If you take it apart it is really amazing – we are re-membered, literally reattached to the body.)*

*Joseph reassures and comforts his brothers with tangible things. He speaks kindly to them. This is not a proclamation but a tearful brother putting his arms around his brothers and assuring them that he loves them, despite what they have done. He knows what they have done and it does not stand between them. God has taken care of that sin. It is done. Every time I remember it, I will always remember that Jesus died for that, and I will rejoice that it is no longer a problem between us.*

*Does God feel this way about us? I hate to say that God’s feelings get hurt, I am not sure that he has feelings in quite the same way we do, but the Bible certainly portrays him as a person whose love rejected is most painful. Just consider the whole story of Hosea in which his unfaithful lover is the occasion of Hosea’s great pain. God likens Israel’s rejection to a marriage broken with God as the grieving husband confronted with proof of his wife’s infidelity. So I continue to speak of God’s great grief at our rejection of his love. C. F. W. Walther would counsel his parishioner who were at the point of despair that they were committing the sin of pride. It is a proud sinner who thinks that his sins are bigger than the forgiveness of God. Yet, I have known more than one sinner who has not darkened the doors of Church because they could not accept that their sin was forgivable. I remember particularly a WWII vet who could not get past the day when he had killed a Japanese soldier in hand to hand combat. No amount of arguing that it was self-defense or a soldier’s duty would do. He had taken a life. His daughter came and took him to a nursing home in Michigan before we got through that one. I still wonder how he died.*

**Sermon Idea** I don’t get mad, I don’t get even, I forgive! (OT and Gospel – That the Holy Spirit would heal and impart a gracious health to the hearer, giving him/her the life which embodies the love of Christ.)

If you did not preach the forgiveness sermon last week, or you want to continue that theme, this might be a good place to go. This sermon will simply assert that forgiveness is really the only way to live, because it is the very life of Christ living in us. This is more than healthy or

therapeutic. It is life itself. The preacher will want to reference the Romans 12 epistle reading if you used it.

The title is a bit of a play on the old the adage, “I don’t get mad, I get even” All of us face problems in life, and especially problem people. Some of them are really a pain in the neck. Our opinion of others is about three feet lower. I can get even, I suppose, and become just as much a pain in their neck (or three feet lower) as they are. But that just makes two of us miserable. I could internalize this whole thing and carry it around, nobly suffering, until I lash out at someone else. But that is neither terribly fun nor healthy. I could strive mightily to walk a mile in their shoes and understand why they are such a jerk. That might help, but it may simply be that they are a jerk and there really is no understanding some of the things that people do. There is a banality to sin.

I can forgive it. That means saying no to all the other options. It means admitting that I am not strong nor tough. It means forgoing the option of “getting even,” even those imagined scenarios where I am in control and they are begging for my help and I say “no.” It means I don’t have to understand what they did, I might not even want to. It means that I say about them and their deed that Jesus died for that. That reality will obtain in all my dealings with this person. I probably cannot do like God does in the psalm and forget about the transgression, but I can remember it red with the blood of Jesus. I can forgive it. My life can reflect the fact that Christ has born this burden and forgiven this sin, Jesus took that on Calvary. My life does not need all the scores settled, Jesus will do any score settling needed on the last day. My life does not need to be tough, it is connected to the very king of heaven and is resilient even through the grave. My life can be free, freely received from God and freely given to my neighbor. My life can be whole, made whole by God and wholly at peace with others. My life can be enjoyed, filled with the joy of Christ which spills over into all that I say and do. I don’t get mad, I forgive.

A necessary thing to say to your folks about forgiveness, especially if they are not used to doing this: The first time you try this, it will feel odd, almost smarmy, but trust me, after a week or two it will be the best thing you ever did. We really do need to practice at this, we need to say the whole formula. “I am sorry...” “I forgive you, Jesus died for that.” It will feel corny at first, but that quickly passes.

#### Psalm 138

<sup>1</sup> I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart;  
before the gods I sing your praise;

<sup>2</sup> I bow down toward your holy temple  
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness,  
for you have exalted above all things  
your name and your word.

<sup>3</sup> On the day I called, you answered me;  
my strength of soul you increased.

<sup>4</sup> All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O LORD,  
for they have heard the words of your mouth,

<sup>5</sup> and they shall sing of the ways of the LORD,  
for great is the glory of the LORD.

<sup>6</sup> For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly,  
but the haughty he knows from afar.

<sup>7</sup> Though I walk in the midst of trouble,  
you preserve my life;  
you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies,  
and your right hand delivers me.

<sup>8</sup> The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;  
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.  
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Romans 12:14-21

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. <sup>17</sup> Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." <sup>20</sup> To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

*Paul is detailing his vision for the Christian congregation here with a personal touch. After all, he knows what it is to be a persecutor and how much such people need our prayers (vs 14). Earlier in the chapter he enjoined them to acknowledge the gifts of the Holy Spirit and let the gifts be used and be used well. Today he enjoins love that is genuine. The salvation event has brought about an obedience to a different principle, our minds renewed by the Spirit (12:2) and the word of Christ means that the old ways of the culture in which we live are no longer the ways that govern our lives. And so, while the world around us delights in evil, we abhor it. This is why there is so much smut on television. It is because people love it. The ever present pressure of ratings drive the content of our TV and movies. If people did not love and crave the evil we see there it would not be on. As it is, I wonder increasingly if we do not come to a day when not owning a television won't become a necessary part of being a Christian. I don't think we are*

*there yet. There is still much that is worthy and good on TV and at the movies, but I find myself increasingly disturbed by what I see there. Perhaps I am just getting old. Remember there was apparently a day when good Israelites could worship at a Baal shrine when “Baal” was understood to simply mean “lord.” Solomon’s great vision was had at the shrine at Gibeah.*

*Paul directs them to a number of positive things. They are not to be slothful in zeal and but to be fervent in spirit and service rendered to the Lord. They are to rejoice in hope and be patient in tribulation. They should love their enemies and one another. They should associate with the lowly and act in humility. As much as they can, they should live peaceably and never seek vengeance because that is God’s prerogative. Their enemies should know their kindness and not their wrath. This will shame, being like burning coals on the head, bringing them around. They overcome the evil with good.*

*I want to serve this congregation! I would think this passage would make a marvelous adult orientation to a congregation or as an outline of an adult membership class for all incoming members.*

*How would it work as a sermon without become a heavy, lawful harangue about failings?*

*Paul is describing Jesus here – yes the Jesus whom we read about in the Gospels but also the Jesus who lives in his people today. This Jesus who once did all these things is now doing them through his people today. This is how we might preach this text as a Gospel text and not a lawful harangue. We are not enjoining people to start doing things, we are noticing that Christ is already doing them and will increasingly do them among us.*

**Sermon Idea:** Overcoming Evil with Good (Epistle – That the Spirit of God would blow in the lives of the hearers, calling forth from them the healthy, good, and Christian life which Paul describes.)

For this sermon, I have extended the reading by a few verses because I think this section actually is flowing out of the material that begins that verse 9.

This is a straight up sanctification sermon. That means we will have to preach with some care because the human tendency in Sanctification sermons is to misconstrue what the text and the preacher is saying into the more familiar economy of life. The old sinner, whom we drown in Baptism through daily repentance, is not one to give up easily. He only understands the economy of buy and sell and will strive mightily to turn Paul’s words into some sort of a payment we are making to God, something that he notices, something that he demands as a condition for his love.

Paul is fleshing out here the renewal of the mind/self he began this chapter with in verses 1-2. It is Justification’s effect upon the person. God renews the person and that means some things start to happen in the life of the Christian. Paul is telling the Romans what sort of a life he calls for from people who listen to chapters 1-8 so it might be a good idea to review some of that. I suggest 3:21-27 and chapter 5.

But this is not talking about justification as a principle, but it is talking justification enfleshed in your life. It is a catalogue of sorts and the preacher will do well to direct his energies to the sections of this which his people need to hear.

<sup>9</sup> **Let love be genuine.** – fakery abounds in Christian communities. The false smile when you see the folks whom you loath. Even the parish which tries to lure in the young people with a praise service they themselves do not want is a form of disingenuous love.

**Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.** – how easy it is for us turn our attention to the things which are bad. One could preach a whole sermon just on what we fill our minds with when we watch television or films. We could talk about the practices of life – is what we do on a daily basis building the good or is it simply coping with the evil and even getting comfortable with it?

<sup>10</sup> **Love one another with brotherly affection.** – What parish doesn't need to hear this? We have, in the words of Jesus, allowed our love to grow cold. Paul envisions a community where love, not the emotion but the deeds of love, are regularly seen and practiced. Can we do that here?

**Outdo one another in showing honor.** – this is a thing of the first century, but it translates well into our time. It was expected that when a senator walked by or another member of the Roman imperial government that the people on the street would pay honor. This usually meant to bow or otherwise demonstrate that this was a high person and you were a low person. The more important the person, the lower the bow. They actually did measure this. Paul is saying that we should not only participate in this, but be in a competition of sorts to show one another honor.

<sup>11</sup>**Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.** – Again, what parish does not have a cadre of faithful but weary soldiers trooping through service? Sometimes they love it. If so point out how Paul approves of such service. But quite often it is the same small crew which is serving a large body of folks who do not participate. It causes hard feelings and it is fundamentally not fair. Paul sees another sort of community living out justification in which we are fervent in spirit and service because it is rendered to the Lord.

<sup>12</sup> **Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.** <sup>13</sup> **Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.** – I see this as the ways one might be fervent in spirit and serve the Lord from the prior verse. It doesn't mean we all do the same thing, but it suggests that together we do these sorts of things.

<sup>14</sup> **Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.** - Here Paul is really challenging our culture today. The world says we should sue the guy who wrongs us and get some money out of him. Paul says we should pray for the people who persecute us and bless them. This is not a human thing but a God thing. Here is a great place to remind the hearer that this is not God asking us to be better humans, but this is God recreating us. If you want to see a great example of this, consider this article or others which are talking about this:

<http://www.elhispanicnews.com/2014/03/05/power-forgiveness/> Jane Samuels was at the time one of the academic advisors at Concordia University, Portland.

**15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.** – this is, I believe, the heart and core of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> commandments. Coveting is not only about wanting the things which our neighbors have, it is much more about stealing their joy and delighting in their pain. Remember our German culture has a whole word for this, Schadenfreude, which means laughing at another's misfortune.

**16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.** – Humility is such a huge part of getting along. It is pride which divides us from one another. The next section of this catalogue really describes what Paul sees as the keys to living in this harmony.

**17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."** – what would be different in our community if we lived this out? What would be just as it is? This sermon can also be about pointing out to our people what God is already doing in our midst and celebrating it.

**21Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.** – Here of course is the title I have given this sermon, but you could almost preach a sermon on any one of these topics. Or you could simply run through the catalogue. You don't have to get really pointed in the law. Your people will apply this to themselves rather well. What you do need to do is constantly remind them that this is the road map of Jesus' activity in our lives.

OR

Romans 8:18-23

<sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. <sup>23</sup> And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> *For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?* <sup>25</sup> *But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

<sup>26</sup> *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.* <sup>27</sup> *And he who*

*searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.* <sup>28</sup> *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* <sup>29</sup> *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.* <sup>30</sup> *And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

*I have extended the reading to the end of the chapter and its resounding hope expressed by Paul.*

*I believe this might be one of the texts most suited to this current age. When our prophet of the age is a former vice president who proclaims an environmental apocalypse, we are probably in a generation of folks who are asking a different set of questions than they were when Luther was on the scene, or my own father for that matter.*

*The preacher today has a chance to say that the salvation which Christ won on the cross is for the whole creation, as it groans. That image of a groaning creation seems ripe with potential for an audience of folks who are concerned about the environment.*

*Now, it must be said at the same time, that my own experience in Lutheran congregations suggests that we Lutherans often make our living from agricultural and extractive industries. That means many of us are farmers, miners, lumbermen, or other folk whose livelihood is threatened by the very environmentalism which Al Gore and the Sierra Club espouse. The preacher thus has two opportunities to preach the Gospel here but might need to exercise a little care in how to do it. Truthfully, the preacher who preached too extreme of a position in my former parish would have done great harm and surely closed the ears of many of his hearers to his message. They were largely folks who made their livelihood in the timber industry. Spotted owl was a dirty word for them. At the same time I lived in one of the most beautiful parts of the world and had some ardent environmentalists in my congregation. If I took the position of industry in this, I was also going to do harm and close ears.*

*So what shall we say? I believe there to be a message of Law and Gospel for both audiences here. Surely we all can lament the trash beside the road, the toxins in the water supply, the degradation of the salmon runs, the loss of species to extinction and the like. Some of those same lumbermen were also avid anglers. The creation does groan, and that groaning is brought on by sin. Whether global warming is a direct result of my gas guzzling ways or if it is indeed a natural cycle, I really don't know and ultimately doesn't make a difference for what I preach. I do know that in much of what I see and hear about the world, I am watching the terrible effects of humanity's fall into Sin. Is the world messed up because it is simply messed up, or did I make it that way? Who can really answer the question other than God? It seems that he suggests our culpability in Genesis 3 when he says that Adam will toil and labor against a nature which no longer is cooperative but which sprouts thistles and weeds.*

*The real joy of this text is that we can preach a message of God's reconciliation with the whole of creation. Jesus did not die on that cross to whisk our souls away to heaven for some sort of*

*spiritual renewal, but he also died for the whole of his creation, a restoration which will take place when the sons of God are revealed on the last day. The passenger pigeon will fly again. There will no longer be a giant island of trash in the Pacific Ocean. The Bikini atoll won't be a radioactive hazard. These things are important to Jesus too, and the answer to these questions lies not with us as much as it does with God. He may use us, and I think we all can agree that responsible stewardship of the earth is a wise and God-pleasing thing, but we hope in Him, not in us.*

*If this is a strange or unusual reading of the text, that is because American Lutheranism has drunk deeply of the Calvinist well. Calvin was a great admirer of St. Augustine, but he read Augustine rather narrowly, focusing on Augustine's "use" of the created world to "enjoy" only God. The result of this is a tendency inside Calvinism and its daughter traditions (Armenianism, Holiness, Pentecostalism, etc.) to see the creation as something which is not part of the plan of salvation. This is why they struggle to see baptismal water as a means of grace. God would never use water, mere creation, to save us because salvation is essentially an escape from creation. In this view, the created world is so corrupt that it must be destroyed utterly and remade. Our bodies, our sinful flesh, the whole world are the problem.*

*Luther and the Lutheran movement, however, has a much more positive view of the created world. Luther loved his beer and sausage, he was happily married, he could wish for the intensity of faith which he saw in his dog who watched him eat the sausage. When Zwingli wanted to suggest that the body of Jesus was limited to heaven at the Ascension, Luther called him an ignorant pig and countered that Jesus had entered the cosmos, united himself with the whole of creation.*

*Thus Lutherans, when they are true to their confession and Lutheran-ness, have a strong theology of the creation, which often finds its expression sacramentally in Eucharist, Baptism, and the Church. These physical, created things are moments in which God restores creation and unites not only our souls but also our bodies to himself in the incarnate Christ. But our theology of creation is not only found in the sacramental actions and elements, but it permeates the whole of our theology, including our stewardship, evangelism, doctrine of vocation, and much more.*

*I would like once more to point out the recurrent Biblical image for the end of the world which Paul uses again here. It is like childbirth. It is dangerous, it is painful, but it is a time of hope and joy as well. The life which awaits us on the other side of the "labor" is a very good thing. As Paul says the current sorrows are not worth comparing to the joys which await us in glory. This too is a really effective image for the hearer.*

*The last section is also really important for it establishes our humility before God. We don't have all the right prayers, but the Spirit does, and groans for us and through us. Even in our best moments, when we do remember to pray, we are always inadequate of ourselves. But God knows this and gives us his very self so our prayers are full and complete and they are heard and answered. This too is another worthy sermon on this text.*

**Sermon Idea:** The whole creation groans, waiting for our revelation as the Sons of God. (Epistle – that the Spirit of God would open the eyes of faith for the hearer to see the connection between sin and the problems of the world and then to rejoice in the promise of Christ’s reconciliation with all of creation.)

This is not an unfamiliar theme for us. We have discussed it before, because this runs throughout the Scriptures. It is a theme, however, which is not frequently treated either as a sermon or theological topic. The spirit of the current age, however, rather forces the topic upon us and this is a great text to address it. As this material is based upon the comments about the Epistle, please make sure you read them too!

The Law development here is really two step. First the person needs to connect the physical issues all of us face to the spiritual brokenness which we all feel. They are all part of the same broken world and picture. The world gives us permission to speak of spiritual brokenness but normally wants to see that as a psychological problem. Religion, however, is allowed to talk about that because science struggles with it. The other brokenness, however, many want to put off limits to the Christian discussion. Such a person re-defines the physical brokenness for us and quite often Christianity has quietly gone along with this, not realizing the implications for our theology of grace.

In this worldly scenario death is normal. Sickness is just a part of life which we need to manage. Hard work is a virtue. Tornadoes, fires, floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes are simply natural events. The mildew in your shower may reflect how often you clean, but it is not the sign of something fundamentally wrong with the world. This text would disabuse of these notions. The creation, the whole creation, groans. The earthquake and tornado, the flood and the pestilence, the diseases and the rest of the things, many of which we are so used to we don’t even notice anymore, they are all part of that groaning. And that groaning started with the rebellion of humanity against the creator. It was not like this as God made the world. This is the second law development. The reason the world is messed up has everything to do with the humanity to which God gave the charge of stewardship of this world. When we fell, the whole world fell with us because God had placed us at the pinnacle of his creation.

The Gospel is that God called his creation very good, he loved and loves it still. The sending of Christ into the physical world means that his physical death reconciles and redeems the whole physical world to himself. Of course that means us, but it also means the whole of creation.

Personally that means that death is not the last word of my life. Jesus has reconciled himself to my body in the cross and resurrection. That means death itself is undone. But the physical effects of Christ’s work are not limited to my personal body and the bodies of all Christians, but seem to extend to the whole of God’s beloved creation. Death is undone. The woolly mammoth’s the early Native American seem to have driven to extinction, the moa which the New Zealanders hunted to extinction, the dodo which the whalers slaughtered to oblivion, they are not all gone. God made them, loved them, has never forgotten them, and will apparently one day restore them

and the rest of this groaning creation. We eagerly anticipate that day. What will it be like to run with a saber-tooth tiger? I don't know, but I won't be afraid.

Luke 6:36-42

<sup>36</sup> Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

<sup>37</sup> "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup> give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."

<sup>39</sup> He also told them a parable: "Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit? <sup>40</sup> A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher. <sup>41</sup> Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? <sup>42</sup> How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.

### **Luther**

1. This Gospel lesson teaches us that we should be genuine Christians who don't just praise faith and the gospel in word, in the fashion of the world which now wants to sound evangelical. Everyone likes to talk about Christ, but their deeds don't bear them out. Most of those who claim to be attentive to the gospel deceive themselves and go to the devil with their faith and Christ, for they haven't receive him, not truly received him. Christ here wants to ward off such pretense and teach us to truly believe...In gist he is saying, Your faith is genuine when you do unto your neighbor as your Father in heaven has done to you.

4. (O)ur dear Lord Jesus Christ is here preaching to all counterfeit Christians. They enjoy sermons about grace and the forgiveness of sins, that the Father in heaven for the sake of his Son, Jesus Christ, suspended judgment condemnation, death and hell, guilt and pain, a bad conscience, all misfortune, and now, instead, has given grace, life, salvation, good conscience, and the kingdom of heaven without our merit or work. Such a sermon, I say, the pseudo-Christians like to hear; but that they, in turn should show mercy, love, compassion, friendliness, and every kindness, with that they will have nothing to do.

5. That is why we must preach to such pseudo-Christians and say, I it is true, God out of pure grace has forgiven all guilt and trespass, as declared by the example (Matt. 18) of the servant from the whom the master wanted an accounting. On the other hand, you should also know that even though God has rescued you from sins, death, hell, guilt, and punishment, and made a country squire out of you, he nevertheless demands interest from you, in that you should be

gracious to your fellowman, and set aside punishment and condemnation as God has done for you. If you do that, you are a true Christian. If you do not, but, on the one hand, accept forgiveness of sins, while, on the other hand, subject your fellow Christian, clobbering and stripping him, then you are a false Christians who does not believe God has bestowed his grace to you, forgiven all your sins, and granted you the heavenly kingdom. For if you sincerely believed this, you would do unto your fellowman as God has done unto you. Even if your fellowman does not deserve it, you should, nevertheless do so for God's sake, to pay in return what you owe him.

12. This is a wonderful sermon, for we see that god places even greater emphasis on service to one's fellowman than service to him. For he, on his part, forgives all sins and does not avenge himself for what we have done wrong to him. On the other hand, if we do wrong to our fellowman, he will be at odds with us and not forgiven. We must, therefore, understand measuring in accordance with our faith, not as we were before coming to faith. Before you came to faith, God did not deal with you according to what you deserved, but according to his grace. He led you to accept his Word and promised you forgiveness of sins. That was the first level on which we were measured, as faith was begun in us. Now, because received such measure from God, he says to us, Remember, measure in the same way with other people. If you refuse, then you will experience what you mete out to others. If you have no compassion on them, I will have none for you. If you judge and condemn them, I will likewise judge and condemn you. You strip them of everything, I will do so to you and leave you with nothing. This is measuring in accordance with faith, because our dear Lord Jesus considers the deeds we do to our fellowmen so seriously, that he will recall whatever good things he has given us previously, if we refuse to do good to our fellowman.

*(The Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils. Vol 2. Ed.: Eugene Klug. Baker, 1996. Pp. 276-282.)*

*Luther paid a great deal of attention to this text and wrote extensively, but his conclusions were always the same. The Christian has a great responsibility laid upon him or her by the graciousness of God. Being a consumer but not a doer of God's grace is simply not an option for us. If we would really receive the grace of God, it must translate into a graceful life. If we continue to operate with our fellow human being on the basis of the world's cut-throat and competitive principles, then we are not really Christians.*

*The preacher needs to read that with a large grain of salt and in context of all that Luther says. He even seems to admit as much in the last paragraph which I record above. Unfortunately the preacher will have both sorts of folks in his congregation. I think too often, though, we speak to the first group which needs to hear the sweet gospel and forget this second measure which Luther mentions above.*

**Sermon Idea:** Dislodging the Plank from our own Eyes (That the Holy Spirit would engender within the hearer the true Christian life which freely forgives and bountifully loves the neighbor.)

While God's love is always without precondition, it does seem to be post-conditional. He does seem to have a legitimate expectation that once loved by him, we become lovers as he has loved us. This idea is woven throughout scripture and the liturgy. There is even a petition of the Lord's Prayer which presumes the connection between God's forgiveness of us and the subsequent forgiveness which we offer to those whom we have offended. Luther draws our attention to the brutal parable of the unforgiving servant in Matt. 18.

The Preacher who undertakes this sermon will need to keep in mind that some folks will be questioning God's love for them. They need to be reassured. But the comfortable fool who assumes that God's love means he/she is secure in grace and need do nothing needs to be made uncomfortable by this passage. For the person who is in doubt, let it be a promise of what God will do in your life, the beautiful thing to which he is calling you and creating you anew. For the ingrate, let it be the measure of their failing, but always in order that it may cast them back into the pool of folks whom God has unconditionally loved.

Here are a few ways this might play out, depending on your congregation:

- A. Judgmentalism – Christ has called us to be witnesses to the truth. We are in some ways called to make judgments about other people, it is true, but we are primarily called to be witnesses to the truth of God's kingdom and love. He has not called us be the jury, judge, or executioner of others. Too often we forget this and would force others to our way of thinking through various means. God's strange and paradoxical love means that on one hand he tells us that we are damnable sinners and on the other hand gave his only-begotten Son for our salvation. Can we witness that adultery, homosexuality, and a host of other sins are wrong and still be kind and even loving to the people who commit those sins? Why is that divorcees stop coming to church? Don't we have exactly what they need? And yet, they fear the reception they will receive from us. Should they? We will not call their sin a good thing, but we will call it a forgiven thing, put our arm around them and weep with them.
- B. Charity – Yes, it is a cliché, but the guy with the cardboard sign on the side of the road is likely a loser, a drug addict, a bum. Sometimes, though, the secular world gets this right when we as individual Christians don't. My wife is a nurse at a hospital and the other day we drove past one of her former patients, higher than a kite, falsely presenting herself for handouts. Yet, the next time she shows up in the emergency room, she will get treatment and the staff will mightily strive to give her the same excellent care they give others. Do we tie our kindness and charity to behavior too much? Did God do that for us? Do we look at the guy with the cardboard sign as Jesus looks at us?
- C. Theological Snobbery – It is true that Armenianism's decision theology, Calvinism's perseverance of the saints, and Pentecostalism's misconstrual of the Spirit are all

problematic expressions. They leave people weak and vulnerable to Satan's assaults. But have we exercised something other than charity with these fellow Christians and have we forgotten that God did not save us because we got our theology right? Have we lost sight of the fact that God in fact works through flawed theologians and Christians in all sorts of places. That is a good thing because we have to admit that we also are flawed theologians and a flawed community. Is it time to see and give thanks for the Methodists, Nazarenes, and Catholics on our street?

- D. Competition – Our world loves a good competition. In that we are very Roman-like. But Paul and Jesus both confronted and challenged that ethos. Our economic system and social systems are often brutal to the “loser” and leaves people isolated, impoverished, and without hope. Christianity's enormous growth in the first centuries of the Church was largely among these people, the slaves, women, and others who were on the bottom of the socio-economic and social ladder. Our culture wants to say that the poor man is suffering just desserts, a sort of fiscal karma. Jesus just sees a person who is hungry and feeds him. Our schools are brutal social places in which students are shamed and sometimes driven to suicide. God saw us worse than outcasts and loved us despite that. Is it time for us to be the people who befriend the outcast, the poor, the folks whom the world considers disposable?

More? There are surely more. You won't want to preach all this, but ask what your congregation needs to hear and work with it.