

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – January 31

Last week we were shocked to find Jesus in his rejection. Self respecting Messiahs don't get rejected, they are winners and people love them. But not our Messiah, his great messiah work was accomplished on a cross, an instrument of torture reserved for the bottom dwelling losers of Roman society.

This week, in the verses which immediately follow those we read last week, we see him perhaps in a little more comfortable role, until, that is, we see him turn to us and administer the kingdom to me too. We understand that other people need help, but I do? Yes, a little cosmetic work around the edges, perhaps. My eyes don't see quite so clearly as I would like so a little laser surgery there would be good idea. Yeah, I should shed a few pounds, and I feel the peripheral problems of health and aging, but I am otherwise OK. I mean, fix a few aches and pains and I am alright. What!? You say, I need a complete redo, a reboot of my life, do over? I rather liked what it was, it had a few rough spots but I thought I was doing OK with this. Our Lord hears this sort of blather and looks on us with steady and penetrating eyes. To our shock, with words of power and authority, Jesus says, "I command you to come out..." He is talking to us!

Did you know that in Orthodoxy today and in the ancient church, every baptism involved an exorcism? It still does in ours, but it is somewhat attenuated in that it is the question which asks whether we reject the devil and all his works and ways. That question really is a vestigial organ of what the ancients understood to be an exorcism. I have seen some efforts to bring this back more vigorously into the Baptismal rite.

Today Jesus, the familiar Jesus of his ministry, hits his stride. Demons are exercised, the sick are healed, and he preaches and speaks with authority. The crowds are amazed, but they want to capture him and make him into a pet. He will have none of it. He has come to save all. He will not be contained in the comfort of our churches. He has come to save the world, including the people I am not so sure should be included in the saved.

Paul will speak to us about love. We get to read the great love chapter of I Corinthians and it isn't even a wedding. It is almost too much for the preacher to pass up. But when read with this Gospel lesson and not in the gauzy white world of wedding bells and June brides, this text takes on a different edge. The love of which Paul speaks can be a terrible thing. It is so demanding, so difficult, and even impossible. What will we do with this? Do we need Jesus to exorcise the anti-love demon who has taken up residence in our hearts? Is there a difference between this demon and me?

But before we get any of these we get the call of Jeremiah, the great weeping prophet of the Old Testament, the prophet who writes the longest book in the OT outside of the Psalter. God calls this unwilling servant and makes him a fortified pillar, an iron wall against which his enemies will rail and fight, but to no avail. He will prevail. His mission is dire, he is to uproot and destroy, overturn and tear down, and only after that to build and plant.

Jeremiah protests in our reading today. He is too young; this must be some sort of mistake. Yet, this is God at work and he works through strange vessels. When taken with the ministry of Jesus, one might notice a strange symmetry. Jeremiah insists that he cannot be the right choice, God sends him anyway. In Jesus' day Jesus speaks and the people say he cannot be the right one, but he speaks anyway. What Jeremiah rightly disavows, God gives anyway, what Jesus rightly claims, the people would take away. But like Jeremiah, Jesus is the iron pillar, the indomitable force, against whom his enemies will break themselves.

Again we ask, where do we see Jesus today? Where does his word of power still speak and reverberate? Where do the Demons listen and tremble and the people of God stand in awe of him? To what shall we point out people today?

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, You know we live in the midst of so many dangers that in our frailty we cannot stand upright. Grant strength and protection to support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ, your Son, Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Like many of these prayers, this collect begins in an uncomfortable admission about ourselves. We are frail, not strong and vigorous like we imagine ourselves. We are frail, like the houses which collapse in an earthquake, like the Syrian children whose shattered bodies haunt the internet news sites, like the poor man whom we find sitting on the street not far from our church, holding up a cardboard sign. We are frail, like the elderly folks we visit in nursing homes and leave thinking that we are glad it is not us in that bed. We are that kind of frail.

The prayer uses the image of the hunched over folks. Is it the people who carry sin's burden themselves? Of course, but we don't think of ourselves that way and sin is a language we don't use outside the walls of our parish. So perhaps we need to think about the folks who really bent over. We might name the aged – the widow with the back hunched over from osteoporosis. We might also think of the impoverished guy carrying some burden in hard labor in his aching back. Grieving people can sometimes be bent over with grief, they cannot push themselves upright. The man in a wheel chair might have a particular insight here, the blind man who is carefully picking his way down the street listening for and feeling the taps of his white cane. The people whose vision is just poor and they spend the worship service carefully picking through the hymns and bulletin, curved over the bulletin.

But the prayer also asks for strength and protection. If I imagine that the sins have bent me over, I don't need strength, I need him to take those away. The dangers are real and ever present. They bend us over. The broken world, the dangers of temptation, and the reality that Christian marriages fail too, these are all present for all of us. Our burdens are just too big for us.

We are not secure. There are many dangers all around us, even within us. Perhaps those inside us are the worst. We cannot control our emotions or our thoughts. We break relationships, we do foolish things, and we harm one another and ourselves. When confronted with a plate full of donuts, we are incapable of self control. What would we do if presented with the serious temptation to betray our spouse or cheat on our taxes or simply disappear into the fleshpots of the world? Are we only kept from these vices by the fear of an audit or getting caught or some dreadful disease? Is it really our self control that keeps us the relatively virtuous sorts of folks that we are?

We pray for God's protection and strength to support us and carry us through all temptations. We need him to do this for us. You can understand our frailty in so many ways. We have been only talking about our moral frailty, but one could run this physically, emotionally, spiritually, etc. Have you ever stood in the presence of a demon? Have you ever simply faced a lion and realized that you are simply another tidbit to him?

We lull ourselves into a sort of complacency, I think, in which this prayer sounds strange. Are we bending over as if we are hiding something? Are we hiding our faith lest the dangerous world simply laugh at us for the superstition of actually believing God? Will they think we are just another religious nut case like the guys who strap a bomb on themselves and blow up a café in Bagdad, or Lahore, or Tel Aviv, or Paris, or San Bernardino?

The prayer was probably written in the Middle Ages or at least remembers when the Black Death stalked the land and one in four European Christians succumbed to it. As we continue to see the random violence which is our world unfold before our very eyes, we surely must admit that we are not so secure.

"Amen, Come Lord Jesus" prayed Paul at the end of Corinthians.

Jeremiah 1:4-10 (17-19)

The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, ² to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. ³ It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

⁴ Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying,

⁵ "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

⁶ Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." ⁷ But the LORD said to me,

“Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’;
for to all to whom I send you, you shall go,
and whatever I command you, you shall speak.

⁸ Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
declares the LORD.”

⁹ Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me,

“Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.

¹⁰ See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

¹¹ And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” And I said, “I see an almond branch.” ¹² Then the LORD said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.”

¹³ The word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, “What do you see?” And I said, “I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north.” ¹⁴ Then the LORD said to me, “Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land. ¹⁵ For behold, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, declares the LORD, and they shall come, and every one shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls all around and against all the cities of Judah. ¹⁶ And I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods and worshiped the works of their own hands. ¹⁷ But you, dress yourself for work; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. ¹⁸ And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. ¹⁹ They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the LORD, to deliver you.”

Jeremiah presents the Old Testament scholar with such a rich opportunity and so many frustrations. By his own description, his career took place in the reigns of no less than four kings, two of which were good kings and two were thoroughly wicked.

It tells us that Jeremiah was a priest of the line of priests which were exiled to Anathoth in the days of Solomon. This makes Jeremiah and his people sort of an enclave of the northern kingdom of Israel in the midst of Judah. We don't know how much they hung on to that northern ethos. They had been here for centuries, but it is interesting that Jeremiah's prophecy does bear a striking resemblance to the only northern prophet we have in the OT, that is Hosea. Like Hosea, he lays a great weight on the covenant which we read in Deuteronomy. God is keeping the

covenant. The impending judgment is the fulfillment of God's end of the covenant if the people fell away.

This familial connection also means that Jeremiah is a physical descendent of Eli and living under the curse that God spoke over him in the days of young Samuel, long before Solomon was born (I Sam. 2:27-36). That curse will play out in Jeremiah's life as his ministry is given to great weeping and sorrow. This curse also means that Jeremiah becomes a forerunner of Jesus in a special way. The Bible had said that anyone who hung upon a tree was cursed, Jeremiah is cursed, both of them become blessings of God to the world.

To the scholar and preacher's frustration, we cannot figure out the chronology of Jeremiah's book. The stories and oracles seem to be jumbled, or they are in some order which we simply cannot fathom or comprehend. Did he put them in some order which we simply do not understand? Did his secretary Baruch do this? We know that on one occasion Jeremiah's book of prophecy was burned and Baruch had to recreate it. One almost imagines the pages getting jumbled up in his flight to Egypt (another Jesus like parallel.)

Today we get the event that started the whole thing out. By the time Jeremiah writes, this is a form of literature. Call visions and their content have become very important for the understanding of the prophet and Jeremiah is clearly shaping something here for the audience, under the guidance of the Spirit. Many before him have written accounts of this first encounter with God (see Isaiah 6 for a dramatic example about 100 years prior to Jeremiah.)

Notice first the content of Jeremiah's call. As I noted above, he has a rather dismal vocation. Four of the six verbs which describe his ministry are essentially destructive. The last two are more gospel, but just by means of the ratio you get the impression that Jeremiah has a rather difficult call to fulfill.

The preacher may also want to take note of the first part of this call vision. God says that Jeremiah has been known to God before his birth and set aside for this task by God. This has long been used by many in the pro-life community profitably. While some care needs to be exercised with this, it does have legs to preach.

What Jeremiah may be more interested in, however, is in asserting just what makes a prophet. He is not a prophet because of his eloquence or his wisdom, his learning or his training, but he is a prophet simply by God's touch. God makes prophet; men do not make prophets. In an element reminiscent of his predecessor Isaiah, God touches his lips, not with a burning coal but with his finger.

After a couple of prophecies which are omitted from our reading, God exhorts Jeremiah to stand up and take up this task of prophecy. God will be with him and make him strong and irresistible. After words like these and the actual way that Jeremiah's life plays out, you can see why he would accuse God of being a deceitful brook. (Jeremiah 15:18) God seems to imply that he will be this tower of strength, but in reality, Jeremiah is beset by many enemies. He always comes out

of the situation, but often it is by the skin of his teeth and the narrowest escapes. See Jeremiah 38 in which he almost dies, having been cast into a cistern. His rescuer is an Ethiopian member of the king's court.

This text seems to be here today because it is a contrast and a preparation for the Gospel lesson in which Jesus really lives up to the sort of prophet that God describes here. Does this reading enjoin us to some confidence or at least boldness, with the realization that bold Christians sometimes are martyred? Perhaps.

We preach to folks who are immersed in work cultures which are dominated by the issues of competence, skills, and measuring success. Does the preacher need to address this? Do we send them out as Christians into their communities to "tell the good news" but fail to recognize that they are seeing this through this competency lens? Are they are so rooted in this culture in which failure will come back to haunt them in a poor job performance review or some evaluation? Do we miss something here? Jeremiah is promised that God will make his words work, not that Jeremiah will succeed or even that people will think much of Jeremiah and his prophetic efforts. Have we and our culture unwittingly combined to put an impossible burden on our people as evangelists?

The point is that God's actions will carry the day, not mine. Jeremiah's youth may have indeed gotten him into trouble once in a while. He may have spoken inappropriately on occasion. God made him a prophet, not Jeremiah's skill. We often like to beat ourselves up for failures, but God can turn failure into his success. He makes our words the iron walls, the fortified towers, and not my skills.

The problem with this from our perspective is that God gets to define success, not me nor my peers. Jeremiah will still weep. He will feel often like he has failed and his message has failed. This is not a promise that he will feel good about it all the time. The promise is that God will use Jeremiah's words. It is not a promise that Jeremiah will like how this plays out.

Caveat: Is this more a text about Jesus than it is a paradigm of my ministry?

Psalm 71:1-6 (7-11)

In you, O LORD, do I take refuge;

let me never be put to shame!

²In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;

incline your ear to me, and save me!

³Be to me a rock of refuge,

to which I may continually come;

you have given the command to save me,

for you are my rock and my fortress.

⁴ Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel man.

⁵ For you, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O LORD, from my youth.

⁶ Upon you I have leaned from before my birth;
you are he who took me from my mother's womb.
My praise is continually of you.

⁷ I have been as a portent to many,
but you are my strong refuge.

⁸ My mouth is filled with your praise,
and with your glory all the day.

⁹ Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
forsake me not when my strength is spent.

¹⁰ For my enemies speak concerning me;
those who watch for my life consult together

¹¹ and say, "God has forsaken him;
pursue and seize him,
for there is none to deliver him."

Is this the prayer that marked Jeremiah's life? Can it mark our own lives? A preacher might find that preaching Jeremiah is much easier if you work through this psalm with the congregation. Jeremiah, believing the promises God makes to him and to us through Christ in this OT reading, can pray this prayer. We can too!

I Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but

rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Is this passage Law or Gospel?

It is Law – Paul describes a terrible standard for love which I cannot meet. I am not always patient, kind, etc. If I hold myself up to this I cannot but be a failure.

It is Gospel – He fully knows me, loves me despite me. Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind, he is not arrogant and rude, he did not insist on his own way that Good Friday but submitted to the cruelties of the mob. He loves all truth, believes all things about me, hopes all things for me, endures all things for me.

Until I am clothed in him, crushed by this description of love, this is a terrible passage, but when I am thus crushed, and he becomes the lover, I am restored. This is a marvelous passage for preaching because in one simple word it conveys both Law and Gospel in a single form.

Paul today is speaking of the most excellent way, the way which is the greatest of the three great virtues/gifts of the Spirit, the thing in this life that is a little bit of heaven itself: Love.

I am regularly struck by Paul's word that Love endures. We cannot bring anything else to heaven, not our wealth, not our fame, not our knowledge, nothing. Not even our faith nor our hope go to heaven with us, despite the blessings they are to us. In heaven there will be no need for such things. But of all that we experience on earth, love comes along to heaven. We take our love to heaven. In heaven not only will it belong there, but it will see its fullest flower and beauty there. Heaven will be love.

That means that right here, in the love I show to my fellow human being, perhaps with a gift to some refugee relief fund or with a kind word to a young person or my spouse, I am experiencing a little bit of heaven right here. That is a remarkable claim to make and one which we too often fail to make. We are in heaven right now, in a sense, in that we can participate in it. We might be more comfortable with that sort of language in the discussion of the Lord's Supper, but Paul really makes the argument that this is also experienced in the Christian community of love.

The real question might be whether we care to think and feel and act this way. Do we ask "How shall I love this person?" when we are in conflict? Or do we ask another question along the lines of "How shall I discipline/get even with/dominate/tolerate this other person?" The truth be told,

I often have to be encouraged and even coerced into some of my acts of love. Even something as simple as worship can become a burden which I endure instead of a moment in which God tells me he loves me and I love him, in which I dine at his table, a beloved member of his family.

I truly believe that we have allowed church, worship, and our Christianity to be defined by an entire ethos which is sometimes directly contrary to our Scripture and faith. How often doesn't church become a place where people exercise power and domination, where battles are won? This is terribly sad for the people inside the communion and an acid which corrodes our witness to those outside. Would any right-minded person want to be part of an organization which solves problems like we do at voter's meetings, conventions, and other gatherings of Christians? Should not love obtain there?

An act of loving a fellow human being is not some virtue to which I need to be exhorted, but it is an inbreaking of heaven into this mundane and otherwise dismal world. I don't need to be exhorted to that, indeed I need it, I want it, I crave it.

Then why is it so hard for me to see this and act on it? Of course, here we might want to remember our frailty and the many dangers and dangerous ones through whom we walk in this life (Collect of the Day). That is exactly what our foe wants. But I also would see here simply a misbelief. We misbelieve what God has said about our lives. We act as if we need to make church into something which is marketable and then people will come. It may be true that they will come, but is that God building the Church or is that me? Is that God making the prophet or am I telling Jeremiah to lighten up on the first part of his message and emphasize the second so that folks will be attracted to it.

Paul proclaims a Christian life of service, patience, humility, gentleness, and much more but he does not try to sell this to me. He describes it as something in which God lives and which participates in heaven itself. It is the one thing from this life which transcends death. I can do right here what I will do in heaven, I can love. This is not something I create; it is what God does in me.

Of course the preacher will need to work a little on the definition of love. The world has pretty well got this bollixed up with emotion. In biblical terms, love is much more an action, a word said, a deed done. It is not a thing of the heart; at least that is not what the Bible describes as love. It is a thing of hands, lips, feet, and life.

What is more, Paul describes love not as an act of the will, but an act of God. He gives me a preternatural love in the gift of the Spirit, and this is a love which is given to all whose heads are wet with the water of baptism. It is this love, not something I can gin up that is never rude, anxious, arrogant, or proud. This gifted love is eternal, gentle, kind, and patient. It endures and perseveres through all things.

Paul puts this love into its context. Our human nature likes the jazzy gifts like speaking in tongues. We tend to find acts of love boring, because we don't see the miracle for what it is. But

Paul recognizes that all the other gifts bow before this one, they are all subject to its rule. Prophecy or wisdom, glossolalia, knowledge or power, without love are but empty, even worse, they a distraction from the real point of this life. Even faith and hope are relegated to a second position after love.

This is hard, and Paul admits this. Right now our vision is skewed, darkened, as though we are looking in a poor mirror or through a bad glass, or perhaps in a more modern image, as if our reception was bad, like when the cable is having a problem and the image on our screen simply dissolves into a bunch of randomly colored squares. We can see something but often can hardly make out what it is. My lust for power, my degradation in sin, the corruption of death, they cling to me and distract me, they obscure my vision. I need God to clear things up for me and I look forward to the day when all this will be crystal clear. Right now it is not, and I must humbly quest for greater clarity, never thinking I have it all to myself, but realize that my “truth” is always filtered through such a lens.

Recently a fellow named Rob Bell wrote a text entitled “Love Wins.” He uses the concluding section of this passage to offer up the possibility that God may have love for folks whom we cannot imagine. He desires that all be saved. I have profound points of disagreement with Bell, I think he does not pay attention to the whole of Scripture as he ought, but at the same time, he does make some good points about being too sure about who is getting into heaven and who is not. Heaven belongs to God, he can open those doors for whomever he sees fit. I only know this mystery in part.

Luke 4:31-44

³¹ And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath, ³² and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority. ³³ And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, ³⁴ “Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” ³⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent and come out of him!” And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm. ³⁶ And they were all amazed and said to one another, “What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!” ³⁷ And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region.

³⁸ And he arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf. ³⁹ And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them.

⁴⁰ Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. ⁴¹ And

demons also came out of many, crying, “You are the Son of God!” But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ.

⁴² And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, ⁴³ but he said to them, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.” ⁴⁴ And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

This Gospel reading presents Jesus as the ultimate modern guy. Like too many of us, Jesus is working too hard. He apparently works all night, they come at evening with all the sick and demon possessed, and then when it is day he looks for a solitary place. It doesn't sound like he got any sleep. He looks like some medical intern who is pulling two straight shifts at the local hospital's emergency room.

You have to have a little sympathy for the folks who are pushing him so hard. They are looking for a health care solution of their own, they don't have insurance, and perhaps they are unwilling to sign onto the emperor's new health care bill. Do they want to keep Jesus in town to be there when they get sick next time? Perhaps they still had some health issues to deal with. Do we try to keep this Jesus for ourselves? Unlike the folks in the New Testament, are we only obedient to Jesus when it comes to the messianic secret? They could not stop talking about him, we don't start! Do we perhaps do what they the folks do here when we try to “tame” Jesus or domesticate him? Do we keep him contained, safe, and on our Lutheran leash? Do we fail to recognize that he is already out there doing things without us? Horrors, he might even be working in the non-denominational church down the road!

The burden here is not really on “each one reach one.” The message seems to be that Jesus is out there doing his thing, he is not going to be stopped by us, but if we insist that he can only work inside our four walls, we will miss what he is doing. He is getting out into the world, whether we agree with that plan or not. He has come to us, he loves us, the kingdom comes, he heals and cleanses, but his mission encompasses a lot more than this.

When we turn our attention to the beginning of the text, when Jesus speaks, things happen, the demons listen, and the world is different for his speaking. It is an interesting feature of the Gospels that the only ones who consistently get Jesus right are the demons. In an argument sense, this works. After all, what your enemies are willing to admit to be true about you really must be so. Today we hear the demons admit that Jesus is the Holy One of God.

We often don't think that our world is filled with spirits good and evil, like the world of the first century reader of this text. Folks in India hear this passage very differently than we do. We think evil spirit and our minds immediately turn to a film like the Exorcist or some other paranormal experience. The only thing that is really accurate about that portrayal is the fear we might feel as we watch that film. When someone in India or Africa hears this, he immediately relates to it. He

knows someone down the street whom he is pretty sure has an evil spirit. Jesus coming into that frightening situation and speaking a word of power which calms that person down and frees them from this burden is something that he longs for. Demons really are frightening, not only the film version of them. So do we insist that our hearers be afraid of demons? Or do we note this fear is now for something else? We are also not afraid of sickness in the same way. Antibiotics save countless lives but they have also insulated us from the fear of a fever like that from which Peter's mother-in-law suffered. Does our lack of such fear in turn stunt our faith? We don't believe in miracles. They are for long ago. Is that because our minds are open or closed? I wonder.

Perhaps we need to speak of "forces" instead of demons here. We have economic forces, environmental forces, psychological forces, addictions, etc., which often are fearsome and a problem for us. But the problem with forces in our lives is that we don't turn to Christ for an answer. His word does not seem to speak there for so many of our hearers. But is that surprising? Do we actually act and speak as if Jesus speaks to those things? Do we need to just start believing and acting on that belief?

The crowd who is there, they notice something. Jesus does not call on God to expel this demon, Jesus speaks the words as though they are his. And the demons listen to him, for the good of the man. Cleansed of his demon, the man is not harmed. The people are amazed at this. His word has authority and power, even the unclean spirits listen.

But then Luke does something really odd. He juxtaposes this story with the story of Peter's mother-in-law. She has a fever, a malady which we also have learned not to fear in quite the same way as the ancients. Remember this is a time before antibiotics and modern medicine. People died from these things, regularly. They appeal to Jesus on her behalf and he stands over her, I imagine her lying on a bed in some back bedroom of the house. He rebukes the fever, exactly the same word Luke used for Jesus treatment of the demon in the paragraph prior. Here is Peter's immediate family member needing and receiving the same sort of treatment from Jesus. At the time when Luke wrote, Peter was a hero to the early Church, a leading apostle, preacher of Jesus, martyr in the days of Nero. He was revered in the Christian community. To our knowledge, this is only time that Jesus worked a miracle on behalf of a disciple or his family other than of course saving them from the storm and feeding them with the multitudes.

Is Luke perhaps saying that those of us inside the church, in the front row, need this same Jesus as much as the person far, far outside the Church too? Does Peter need Jesus as much as that Jewish demoniac in the Synagogue? Is the forgiveness we must have the same as the forgiveness as the prodigals and prostitutes? Is the baptismal cleansing of my life just as profound as the cleansing of the demoniacs and lepers?

Does this reality perhaps change us significantly and the world in which we live? Is the difference between me and the guy sitting under the bridge shooting himself drugs or drinking himself to a stupor not found in the magnitude of what we do? Is it simply true that that he is no

worse than I am and that we are really the same? We are both in need of and receive this same Jesus. Jesus is going to get out to that guy. I can close my eyes and think that He belongs in this Church with me, and he will regularly come in this sacrament and word, but he is not content to stay here, and I cannot be so arrogant as to think that he is going to stay here or that this is the only way he works.

I also might want to take the occasion to point to the many and beautiful ways he does get it out into this world through us. Do we gather food for the hungry? Do we volunteer for a local agency? Is there a family or two in Haiti who will be benefiting from our gift through some agency like Lutheran World Relief or the Red Cross? This might be a great time to help people see and feel good about the ways that Jesus is getting out of your church and into the community. The reality is that feeling good about those things is far more encouraging for them to join in those activities than a tirade about how they are not doing it.

The next paragraph depicts Jesus receiving all the problems of mankind. They bring them all to him, and he cleanses them all. The demons submit to his word and the diseases flee before him. The blind see, the deaf hear, all the troubles of mankind are dealt with in his gentle hands.

And then, at the last paragraph, the crowd naturally wants to keep Jesus all to itself. They would have their pet miracle worker, their tame messiah, their own cure for sin. But Jesus will not be thus constrained. He has come to preach to all the villages and communities. They need him, that is why he is here. Jesus has a mission statement. I wonder if it was printed on his business card.

Law

1. I am danger from forces which I often cannot even comprehend. Satan is not openly playing his hand, but cunningly he hides today behind the mechanisms which my knowledge thinks to describe and control for me.
2. And thus, thinking I a in some measure of control would describe the limits of God's salvation for me. I foolishly think that he is some sort of divine vending machine dispensing the blessings of my selection. But in truth I am not sure what my problem is, I just know I have one. My plan of salvation often looks like a random pushing of buttons.
3. I cannot even love right. I hear Paul's description of love in the epistle lesson today and am terrified by what I hear there. My patience, my kindness is too short a supply, my arrogance and my self-centeredness don't even let me see how empty this is. My love is a vapor which blows away in the wind. It does not last.
4. Because of the narrowness of this my vision, my prayers are for myself and those whom I value. My only iron will and fortified pillar action is when my interests are threatened. The problems of the rest of the world are just to big. I cannot worry about them or risk madness.

5. And so I hunker down and assume a defensive posture. Jesus in my life may indeed be a very good thing, but I am so fixated on my own situation that I would keep him here. My outreach with God's love suggests that I am sometimes afraid I will run out.

Gospel

1. Jesus speaks words of authority and power and the demons listen to him. My bitterest enemy must submit to the authority of Jesus. There is no foe, not even death, which does not yield before his greater authority and power. I am truly blessed and liberated by Him.
2. Jesus does not see things as I see them. The disciples who thought that a simple touch of a woman would heal the fevered woman are perhaps startled to hear that Jesus rebukes the fever. He sees my sin for what it is, even when I do not. He deals with the real problem, not the one I define, and he saves me from my true enemies.
3. Surely one of my greatest enemies has been myself. I cannot love so God gives me this gift. This most basic of human realities has been restored to me in Christ.
4. In his cross he has opened his invitation to the world. All its problems, the teeming slums of distant lands where people live in crushing poverty, the cancer which eats away at the body, the heart disease which lurks and kills, the abusive relationship, the addiction, everything is something for which he has died.
5. But not only has he extended the invitation, he has sent forth his gracious self into this world, to seek and to save the lost. This is his mission. The others also need this message and he would that it get out and he goes and preaches.

Sermon Ideas

1. Love Divine, all loves excelling (LSB 370) (That the hearer would believe that God has filled his/her life with his impossible and miraculous love, a love which finds expression in our lives, a miracle of God.)

Paul's words on love today serve as the focus. This sermon could be profitably done simply as an unpacking of that profound text. Several points come to mind here.

- a. This is the most excellent way – Love is the very operating system of heaven. As God's people we have been infused with God's love in our baptism and we get rejuvenated in the Supper. God is not waiting until we get to heaven to enjoy its most precious gift and very essence.
- b. This love trumps all other gifts from God and is common to every Christian. No one can say "you have love, but I have faith." Without love, faith is meaningless, as is power, knowledge, wisdom, and every other gift. There is no rectitude

without love, it is all wrong. (And is this the particular repentance due from us in the LCMS which is known for fighting for the right doctrine and taking no prisoners when it comes to conduct of our church politics?)

- c. Love has a particular way. Not everything is love and this love which God has poured into our hearts has a particular shape. Just because I want to call it love, does not make it so. Paul's list of loving activity is important here both in its specificity and in its breadth.
- d. Love is the one thing of this earth which I can bring to heaven with me. The rest of my Christianity, even the best things I do other than love, even faith, and hope, they all will pass away.
- e. This is hard. I see through a glass darkly, I have to approach this with a strong measure of humility and the simple recognition that no one on this side of heaven has a lock on truth, not even Martin Luther or the LCMS.
- f. Love remains, it is the defining mark of the Christian, for Christ lives in us.

This sermon has to be more than a teaching sermon. Its proclamation of the Gospel needs to be a creative act in which God creates the very subject of which we speak. The love which forms the subject of this sermon also needs to be actualized in the lives of the person. It is not that our love earns God's favor, but God's favor does create this love and if we sit here and insist on "faith alone" and miss what Paul says about love here this sermon has missed the mark.

- 2. What! You mean this is for me too? And for you!?! (That the hearer would recognize that Jesus has come to work his great miracle on our lives too. If we would be whole, we need the same Jesus who comes for the sinners and tax collectors, demoniacs, and drug addicts.)

This sermon simply wants the hearer to realize that Luke is telling us that Jesus has come to do for you what he did for that demoniac. It is a blindness to think that this most profound help of Jesus is really for someone else. He has come to save me, all of me. I might protest that I am basically OK, just a little touch up around the edges, a band-aid or two for the things I might like fixed, but don't go to too much trouble. Whatever you do, don't kill me.

Jesus will have none of this. He has not come to put new wine in an old wine skin nor to sew a new patch on an old garment, it won't work. He has come to remake my whole life. Peter needed this just as much as any demoniac and we are no different.

Praise God, he has done it. He did not do what I wanted but what I needed. He has come to remake me and in the waters of my baptism he did just that. He slew the old man and raised up a new one who loves the will of God and delights in his decree.

Like Jeremiah, I must admit that this is the work of God, not of me. With Paul I can expect this new person to do amazing things, even participate in the very salvation of the world. Jesus heads out this day to other villages, to the man and woman who live over the next hill in darkness and despair. That saving ethos has been written into the very hearts and minds of God's people to this day. This is not just for me, but it is also for the guy who sits at the table next to me in Starbucks or stares out at nothing from over the piece of cardboard as I drive out of the Wal-Mart parking lot. I would like to keep this Jesus for myself sometimes, but he will not abide that. He has come to seek and save the lost and by taking up residence in my life, he has defined me this way too.

3. Jesus has come for this purpose – and he won't be denied (That the hearer would believe and rejoice in the fact that Jesus has come for the salvation of the whole community, not content to remain inside these walls, he is breaking out into this community with his message of love, powerful words, effective salvation, and divine favor.)

The folks in Capernaum wanted to keep Jesus close, they had a healer who could fix any problem and they wanted to keep him right there in town. But Jesus won't do that. He has a mission, he has come for others too. Jesus is not our pet!

He healed the whole community, the demoniacs and Peter's mother-in-law. They all needed and received that Jesus and now the project is expanding.

That same Jesus has come to us, he has washed away our sins in this baptismal font, he is here today to feed us in this sacrament, he has forgiven our sins in the words of the absolution, but we cannot imagine that this is the only place that he will work today. He has a heart for every member of this community, the most broken and fearful and sinful as well as the folks who are utterly unaware that they need him today. He loves them all and he will not be confined by these four walls and this door.

That is a challenge to us once in a while. It really is a matter of how big of a God we conceive of when we pray and worship him. We would like to keep him here, and that is a sign we love him, perhaps we don't always understand him, but we love him. But he won't be confined by that. Like the disciples who looked for him, he invites us to head out into this community with him. He will go, with us or without us, but he invites us to head out there. I can tell you that I have been in this building several times every week and I have never found Jesus sitting in here waiting for next Sunday. He is out there, loving his people.

This would be a great time to talk about the good things that you are doing in the community, the quilters, and the food bank, the volunteers and the teachers in the local

public school and the folks who make their work places better just because they are there. Talk about the neighborhoods in which you live and which are blessed.

This is not really a time to beat people up with the notion that they are not doing enough. Jesus is the one who bears the burden; he invites us along for this ride.

4. He speaks with Authority! (That the Spirit of God would open the ears and hearts of the hearers to Jesus' authoritative words spoken today.)

We tend to see authority only in the negative. It constrains our lives, tells us how fast we may drive, where we can park, and much more. To have the "authorities" looking for you is not a good thing. But authority can also be an authority to do good. The probate judge has the authority to give me my fair share of the will. The provost of a university has the authority to issue a degree to the student. The doctor has authority to prescribe a medication which speeds the healing of the patient.

Jesus today speaks with authority. He stands over Peter's mother-in-law. The demons cower before him. He has authority, the gravitas of God. The whole of his creation hangs on his every word.

The preacher would probably do well to bring in Matthew 20, 28 and John 20. In those passages Jesus claims all authority and then authorizes his disciples to forgive sins, and proclaim his kingdom/make disciples, baptizing and teaching. That means that the words we speak in forgiveness are authorized. The same Jesus who calmed the sea, whose voice gave the demons cause to tremble, at whose command fevers fled, this Jesus speaks through us today. I may not have the authority to multiply loaves and fishes, but I have the authority to forgive sins, the greater miracle by far. With such authority I get to define reality for the sinner. Reality no longer is about their sin, it is about God's mercy, grace, and forgiveness. That is real, much more real than their sinfulness.

This sermon will really proclaim that the Jesus who walked Capernaum's dusty streets long ago is also here. He speaks today, with the same authoritative voice, the authority to do good, to define reality for me. He drives away the demons of my past and the broken relationships which have plagued me. He drives away the demonic fear which possessed me. He drives away the devilish world in which I must ever work for an approval which is always just out of reach. He speaks good to me.

You might want to tie this with the good news he preached last week in the reading in which he claimed that in hearing his words the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled.