

### **Third Sunday in Lent – March 24**

Today we might we all ask one another: Who do you think God is? If you want to continue in the idea that this is a program of catechesis, the catechumens started with the good news of Jesus' victory over Satan in the temptation sequence on the First Sunday in Lent. The Second week they heard the difficult message that the mechanism of God's victory is through the suffering of Jesus and perhaps you as well. The victory was not a victory of glory, but the victory of the cross. After that message, it was time to give them a message about the very heart of God. God is love. Strangely, even though we cannot imagine loving someone this way, God loved the folks who were being herded into the arena to face the lions and he loved the children slain in Newtown and victims of the latest earthquake in Taiwan, the wars in the Middle East, and all the rest. They did not suffer and indeed no one suffers today because of a failure of God's love for them.

This is hard, because we naturally want to put our relationship into a mechanism in which I can measure or somehow understand and comprehend the love of God. The easiest way to do that is to say that in some way I can measure God's love by how I am treated or by how I succeed. God is healing my sickness, I am prospering, my marriage is happy, my children are doing well, my health is good, etc. But the problem with that sort of a love metric is that occasionally the earth does shake, the health does fail, the job is lost, the children do develop mental illness, etc. If you are thoroughly enmeshed in this faulty metric of God's love, you will be tormented at that point. What is more, this is simply contradictory to God's own revelation of himself.

God's love, the strange relationship God has with his creation, is utterly beyond our measure and cannot be somehow contained in the mind of man, understood, comprehended. Paul speaks of a peace that passes all understanding in Philippians. The Psalmist stands in awe of God's great mercy and love for his people. The New Testament has four very different Gospels which each try to shine a little light on the work of Christ, but none of them can fully comprehend him. God's love doesn't make sense. That seems to be the message of the whole Exodus narrative and the subsequent stories of God's interaction with people, right down to his story of his interaction with me.

This has a strange effect on us, one which I cannot really say I fully understand. It was an old preacher who pointed this out to me. You will slowly, step by step, become like the God you believe in. If you worship a God who is the stern judge of all, you will become stern and judgmental. If your God is a puritanical rule-giver who is crabby and always grumpy about the sins of men, you might jump on the Mayflower and sail to the New World to found a new place where you can set up the rules and enforce them. If you believe God is a benevolent but impersonal life force in another dimension, it won't be long before you really don't care that much what happens in this world. You are getting the point. And of course I am aware that there

are exceptions to this, joyful puritans, engaged spiritualists, etc., but they simply serve to prove the principle by their very exceptionalism.

God reveals his inner heart to us today and we are given to see his merciful love for his rebellious creation. Worshiping that sort of a God will also have this same effect on us. This God loves the world he made, he will not cheerfully destroy, but joyfully preserve, forgive, and sustain that which is broken. Thus, singing the praises of this God will result in us looking like this God, gracious, merciful, patient, long-suffering, but mostly and best described as love. You could do a lot worse than that.

### **Collect of the Day**

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*There is a marvelous illustration which comes from the tortured history of the Hymn “O Christ, Our Light, Our Radiance True.” If you look in the hymnal it is credited to the famous seventeenth century hymn writer Johann Heermann, and indeed he did publish it. But he did not originate the text or at least the central idea. He got it from “A New Christian and very necessary Prayer Book” published in Hamburg in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. But little did he know that the prayer he found in that book was actually written by Peter Brillmacher, a Jesuit who was active in the counter-reformation movement. The words which we sing “Shine forth on those estranged from you.” and “The wanderers lost in error’s maze” are, in the author’s original intent, identifying the very protestants who now love the song. We of course think this is about mission work, and have in mind some missionary in a distant land. The guy who wrote it thought that you and I were lost in error’s maze and estranged from God. He thought you needed to be shown the way home. (If you are interested in more stories like this, I highly recommend the “Hymnal Companion” which was published as a supplement to LW by CPH and authored by Fred Precht.)*

*I bring this up because the prayer asks that God be gracious to all who have strayed from His ways. The prayer can really only be prayed by the person who is himself engaged in the process of God’s restoration. Otherwise it becomes a terribly arrogant and evil thing. If we would dare send a missionary because we don’t need saving, we are theologically jerks. On the other hand, if we see that we too have been saved, we too are the objects of God’s great redeeming love, and that we are given the opportunity to join in that redeeming work, the missionary might be a good idea. Perhaps even stranger is the fact that God does work through the missionary sent for all the wrong reasons. Our prayer on the behalf of the world is not a prayer that they become like us, but that God’s love be shown to all, as we have experienced it in our own need.*

*The larger and I think more significant line in here is actually the ascription. The glory of God is found in his mercy, and I would add, not his power. Now the mercy may be expressed in the context of power, indeed it almost has to be, but it is the mercy of God that is his glory, his real claim to fame. He has mercy.*

*The readings today will open up for us a profound and important insight into the very heart of God, at least that much of his heart which he reveals to us. As John so eloquently and simply says it, God is love. As we noted above. If you would worship such a God, you should expect that you will become more and more like that God. You will become more and more mercifully loving in word and deed. The world will not expect that and really won't know what to do with you.*

Ezekiel 33:7-20

<sup>7</sup> "So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. <sup>8</sup> If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. <sup>9</sup> But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

<sup>10</sup> "And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus have you said: 'Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?' <sup>11</sup> Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?

<sup>12</sup> "And you, son of man, say to your people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. <sup>13</sup> Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die. <sup>14</sup> Again, though I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, <sup>15</sup> if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. <sup>16</sup> None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he shall surely live.

<sup>17</sup> "Yet your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not just,' when it is their own way that is not just. <sup>18</sup> When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for

it.<sup>19</sup> And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by this.<sup>20</sup> Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways."

*What does that first paragraph mean? It seems to say that if I silently allow the neighbor to die in his sin without warning him, he will die, but his blood will be required from me. What does that mean? Surely we don't want to introduce some work-righteousness here by which I am now forced to do something to gain heaven. At the same time what else can this mean if when I do warn him I have delivered my soul? (vs 9) Is it simply the case that a silent Christian is in fact so out of step with the heart of God that we need to ask some pretty serious questions about the integrity of our relationship with God? While speaking does not earn God favor, silence is so contrary to God's loving nature that it speaks a strong word of Law, yes condemnation against us?*

*Another way to think about this is that the Bible does seem to imply that while all are saved by grace, there is some sort of reward system for those who are graciously brought into heaven by Jesus blood. Paul speaks of a man who saves his life but like a man fleeing a burning building, with only his life, while another has a house built with precious stones and costly materials (I Corinthians 3:10-15.) Jesus also speaks of rewards. Is this what is meant?*

*Do we just punt and say that God has not made us each into a watchman for the house of Israel? Is this something that only applies to a few prophets like Ezekiel or another category of human being? Or is the solution found in the "house of Israel." Ezekiel seems not to be called to warn the Babylonians among whom he lives. Does God only hold us responsible for some people?*

*Does the great commission and texts which enjoin us to spread the kingdom of God prove helpful in this conundrum?*

*It seems that God loves all these people. And it seems that God has established Ezekiel as an instrument of that love and God seems to be saying that he takes this very seriously, frightenly seriously. It may also be that this is simply Ezekiel's preface to an unpopular message. He knows his audience won't like it and so he reminds them that being a prophet is not entirely an optional vocation. When the Word of the Lord calls, the prophet has to respond.*

*Perhaps the solution is actually found in the very next passage. There the people are saying that God's love doesn't apply to them. Their sins have cut them off from God and they rot away in death. God's great love would have Ezekiel call them back from that precipice of despair. He would have them at least hear that God does not desire their death, but desires to give them life. Is that what we dare not let the neighbor not hear without risking our very lives? Does God's gracious mercy turn us into living invitations, exemplars of mercy to this world? If we deny that*

*mercy are we denying God's love for us? Are we enjoined to let no one think that their sins are greater than the love of God?*

*Allow me a brief note/rant on translations here. I am so glad that we are using the ESV at this point. The NRSV translates "son of man" with the very unpoetic and clumsy "mortal" out of a misplaced sensitivity to inclusive language. Now I have no desire to offend women in the congregations to whom I preach, but this is just pathetic. First of all, it is a pathetic that we assume women cannot understand this. Secondly, it sounds awful to my ear. But most importantly, "mortal" disassociates this part of Ezekiel from the way Jesus often referred to himself. I believe he is deliberately playing off this language when he uses this phrase repeatedly to describe himself.*

*That said, this is a very important passage from the Old Testament and deserves attention from the people of God on a regular basis. Ezekiel, you must remember, is among the first batch of Jews whom Nebuchadnezzar takes into exile in Babylon, in the 598 BC. Nebuchadnezzar had tried to work with the people of Judah, but they kept rebelling. In the first instance he only took out the leadership, the king, the nobles, the priestly families, etc. Ezekiel, one of the priests, was in that first group. They would be critically important because when the much larger groups would arrive a decade or so later when the city was destroyed, they found a community of leaders who were already there, already in place, ready to receive this influx of refugees. This exile in stages was critical for the Jewish culture and people to survive this trauma. The northern ten tribes of Israel were exiled all at once and utterly obliterated as a culture by the event. They simply were absorbed into the larger cultural setting of the Fertile Crescent.*

*Ezekiel is one of the leaders who is confronted with the arrival of tens of thousands of their fellow countrymen. As a prophet and priest, he was naturally in something of a leadership role. This section of his book seems to be Ezekiel dealing with a complaint raised by the exiles, a complaint directed at God. In theological terms this is known as a theodicy, the act of accusing God of being unfair or unjust. When we encounter it today in our parishioners we are often tempted be offended. But the fact is that theodicy happens regularly in the OT, in fact several Minor Prophets are almost wholly dedicated to this, Nahum and Obadiah come to mind immediately, but also Jeremiah has sections of complaints leveled against God and it seems the book of Job is also in some way dealing with such a complaint. God almost welcomes people to be angry with him, he wants to know about the whole range of our emotions, it would seem.*

*In the first paragraph, Ezekiel establishes his own bona fide to be saying what he says. He has to say this. He cannot keep quiet except at great personal peril. God will require of him the blood of the unwarned and impenitent sinner. The impenitent sinner who is warned, his blood is on his own head. Thus, Ezekiel pleads for understanding here from his countrymen. He cannot just not say this.*

*The first complaint of the children of Israel seems to be born of despair. Their sins are so heavily lying upon them that they wonder how they can even live. It must have been terribly bleak for them at the time. We see it through the retrograde lens of history, but they were living through it. They did not know how this would turn out. Worse, it appears they have assumed that their punishment means that God is angry with them, that he is taking some sort of a delight in their punishment. They are not finding a friend in God, but their judge and they are on the verge of losing all hope.*

*Ezekiel counters that God does not delight in the death of a sinner, rather his delight is in the salvation of the penitent. He stands ready to clasp hands with them, help them, pull them up, befriend them, and bestow life. The only thing that stands between them and the help of the almighty is their stubborn adherence to their own sinfulness.*

*Starting in verse 12, Ezekiel then moves onto another complaint, namely that the mold has been cast and that the exiles are caught up in the bitter wheels of divine justice. They are stuck, labeled as sinners. Ezekiel says that this is not so, indeed it works both ways. The righteous man, the man who has it all together, he can stumble and fall, indeed his trusting in his own righteousness will be his undoing. On the other hand, the sinner who repents, who returns the stolen money, who makes his amends, he is given a new chance, salvation itself. You are not stuck in your label, but God begins every moment anew with you.*

*In the last paragraph Ezekiel gets to the heart of this matter. The people are claiming that the ways of God are not just. Why are they in exile when the prior generation which was just as wicked died in their beds in their homes in Jerusalem? Why are they struggling in this strange land with its bad food, its odd customs, its alien tongue? It is not fair! Ezekiel offers them this word of comfort and insight. Billy Graham famously quipped that God has no grandchildren, only children. Every one of us is in a personal and direct relationship with Him. He treats each of us fairly and with compassionate justice. The penitent sinner is forgiven and restored. The sinner who chooses death in this situation has only himself to blame.*

*This passage is important because it speaks to every generation in its relationship with God. None of us is God's child because our grandfather or parents or some other progenitor was a Christian. God established your relationship with him in your baptism. He has not judged us corporately, but individually, likewise he forgives us that way as well. This is a dangerous message for Americans who are coming at this from the completely opposite direction as the ancient Jewish people who thought that God only dealt with them corporately. Oddly enough, the message for the American audience may well be the exact opposite. We do bear responsibility for our neighbor's sin, but that is because God deals with him as an individual as well.*

*I think, however, that the real take away message here is God's intense desire that the sinner be saved. He is not interested in the death of the sinner. He does not like sending anyone to Hell. He*

*hates it, he wants to give life, he wants to restore, he wants to save. God loves his creation, his sinful people, despite their past and their present and though he knows what they will do in the future.*

*One time when I preached this, I used this illustration. I grabbed three children from the congregation and had them stand in the aisle of the Church. One little girl I had stand right in front of the altar. The next little boy I put in the middle and the third, an older child, I put near the entrance to the church. I described their placement as reflective of their life. One was near to God, another not as close, another some distance away. I then said that what God cares about in this text is which way they are facing. I had them face the altar. I spoke of this as the penitential pose. I turned them from the altar, and reminded the folks that one could be living a pretty virtuous life by common standards and be facing the wrong way.*

*I finished with them facing the altar again, and I asked them all to take a step. Which way did they step? Of course it was ahead, of course it was one step closer to God.*

*You might just work a little language in here. The Hebrew word for repent is “shub” (pronounced with a long “u” and “b” as a “v”) it means turn around. The Hebrew temple had been built facing the opposite direction from the direction Baal temples faced intentionally. . Thus to attend the temple in Jerusalem was to “turn around” to face the other direction of the pagan peoples in the neighborhood.*

## Psalm 85

<sup>1</sup>LORD, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

<sup>2</sup>You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you covered all their sin.

*Selah*

<sup>3</sup>You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.

<sup>4</sup>Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us!

<sup>5</sup>Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?

<sup>6</sup>Will you not revive us again,  
that your people may rejoice in you?

<sup>7</sup>Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,  
and grant us your salvation.

<sup>8</sup> Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;  
but let them not turn back to folly.

<sup>9</sup>Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,  
that glory may dwell in our land.

<sup>10</sup> Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;  
righteousness and peace kiss each other.

<sup>11</sup>Faithfulness springs up from the ground,  
and righteousness looks down from the sky.

<sup>12</sup>Yes, the LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.

<sup>13</sup> Righteousness will go before him  
and make his footsteps a way.

*We have seen this prayer before and its imagery of God's righteousness and peace kissing in verse 10 is worthy of our repeated attention. The psalm begins by remembering God's past forgiveness. He has relented and forgiven his people in the past, but now the psalmist wonders if God will do so again. His concern and the way he couches this suggests that he is wondering. He is in tension. But his faith gives him to look to God for mercy, not judgment.*

*Yes, the Lord will give what is good, he asserts in verse 12. Faithfulness does not spring up from our doing or our making it so, but it springs up from the ground and God's righteousness looks down from the sky. If you have a few moments, consider reading the preface to Luther's collected works which he wrote toward the end of his life. He describes how much he hated the phrase "Righteousness of God." He was teaching the psalms at that point in his life. He stressed that we needed to humbly submit to God's judgment and decisions. He did not yet understand that the righteousness of which the Psalmist speaks is a gift from God. He thought it was something to which he needed to attain through the humble submission and obedience to God's righteous command.*

*His description of the state of affairs after that realization was made is striking and worth considering in light of this psalm.*

I Corinthians 10:1-13

<sup>1</sup>For I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup>and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, <sup>3</sup>and all ate the



same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup>and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup>Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

<sup>6</sup>Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. <sup>7</sup> Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." <sup>8</sup> We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. <sup>9</sup>We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, <sup>10</sup>nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. <sup>11</sup>Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. <sup>12</sup>Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. <sup>13</sup>No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

*This end of this text shows up in many of the Bible studies I have led as well as in other conversations with Christians about the topic of temptation. We seem to have this down, what we don't have down is the first part of this pericope.*

*Paul wants his Corinthian congregation to know that their fathers were all under the cloud, passed through the sea, etc. But these are all gentiles, they are not Jews, or at least a fair number of them. But Paul can call them children of those Exodus Israelites through faith (see Galatians 3 among other places.) He doesn't even need to explain that here, but perhaps it does merit a little closer attention on our part.*

*But then things get weird. His recapitulation of the Exodus event includes a few details I missed out on in my Old Testament introduction class. It is essential here to remember that Paul, prior to his conversion, had been educated as a rabbinic Jew. He did not perceive of his conversion to Christianity as a departure from his previously held faith, but as a completion or a fulfillment of that faith. He did not stop being a Jew, instead he became a Jew whose messiah had already come. He argued that he was a better Jew as a Christian than he had been before that encounter on the road to Damascus. Following Jesus is to be a true Israelite.*

*The Rabbis of the second temple era and subsequent centuries used an interpretational technique which we don't find as palatable, but is still practiced in some quarters of Christianity today and was wide spread among the Church fathers. They read it "literally" not in the sense that all of us read literally after the enlightenment, but in another, highly religious sense. They believed that every word, every stroke of the pen, was in fact inspired. Thus a single word that was present or not present could have tremendous importance, even if we would not find it significant. In Jewish communities as they read the Torah this was practiced with considerable rigor. Every text was scrutinized with great detail, argued about, and back stories were created to explain why the text*

*said it this way or that way. These back stories were called Midrash and were considered somewhat authoritative, although not with the same authority as the Bible.*

*Paul is quoting and using one of these midrash stories in this passage. In the accounts of the Exodus it says that the people of Israel drank water from the rock which Moses struck. This is recorded in Exodus 17, immediately after the crossing of the Red Sea. But then again, much later in the narrative, a similar story is told in Numbers 20. Our occidental minds simply read this and assume that another rock was struck. But the oriental mind of a literal reading Jewish rabbi does not think that way. Because the definite article is used, the rock is described as “the” rock, the Jewish interpreters of Paul’s day assumed it was the same rock. They are in different places, but this simply must mean that the rock followed them around in the desert. This explanation was eventually accepted and became a midrash.*

*Paul is quoting this midrash in the first paragraph, but Christianizing it by saying that the rock which followed them was actually Jesus. For us the question is “what is this doing in my Bible?” It also makes us wonder about just how authoritatively this speaks. Do I have to accept that if I am someone who believes in the inspiration of Scripture? Fortunately there is a little room to have a discussion here, but it is not always an easy discussion. I do have this image of a pillar of fire leading Moses and the Ark, the people, the tabernacle, and all their baggage traipsing through the desert with a large boulder rolling after them. Is that what Paul meant?*

*It is the second paragraph which is more likely the one which intersects with the Lenten tide; although, the reading of Jesus in the events of the Exodus is certainly part of preparing for the Easter Vigil. The second paragraph tells us that these stories were included in the text for our instruction. In other words, God had us in mind when he caused these things to be written down. That is an interesting hermeneutical truth which has something to say about the way we read them. The whole post-enlightenment interpretational world has been dedicated to saying that this is not true.*

*Paul asserts that these stories are cautionary tales for us, so we don’t fall into the same sort of trap. Pride is identified as a serious weakness here, something which will cause us to fall into sin. The Corinthians and the rest of us are not subject to special temptation or things which other folks have not also endured. God knows temptation, he will help us, and he will also give us a way out. We might often fail to see it, fail to walk through that door, but always God will be ready to help us escape this moment of temptation. I think the real take-away message here is that temptations are not “tests” which God administers to us to see if we will fail or otherwise not measure up. They are a reality of this broken world, God does not like them either, and so he is here to help us through them, even though we honestly have failed on many occasions before. He does not abandon us, but walks through the door that is today with us and faces our challenges with us, and offers us his help. This is a totally different way to think about temptation than most people do, even when they quote this passage, which they frequently do. Out of context*

*it sounds like a total body slam on the fallen sinner. God tried to help you, but you failed. In fact, this is a message of hope to every addict who has hit rock bottom as well as every Christian who simply engages in the struggle with sin.*

*The real body slam is on the person who does not think they really need this help, or who has grown so comfortable with their sin that they have just quit fighting it. I really believe that most of this generation will comfortably slouch their way to perdition. They won't commit some terrible sin, neither will they actually try to stop sinning. They will just put up with it, consider it normal, and in so doing turn their back on the help that God offers them. This is complacency.*

*We really need to spend a little time on that "You have not face a temptation that is not common to man" the horror of temptation is that it isolates us, makes us think that we alone have failed, that we are really awful, worse than anyone else when we fail. It leaves us in a dark and lonely place, just where our enemy would like to keep us. Paul opens the door and shines a little light for us. We are not alone. Indeed, the temptation we may face has also been faced and conquered by another man, a particular man, Jesus, the Christ.*

*God is faithful, he was there every time you failed, and he will be there next time you face that temptation, pulling hard, helping, providing, he hopes, he has faith, this time might be the time you and he have the victory over this one. He is faithful. He never gives up on you!*

Luke 13:1-9

<sup>1</sup>There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? <sup>3</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. <sup>4</sup>Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

<sup>6</sup>And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup>And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' <sup>8</sup>And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. <sup>9</sup>Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

*Again, as in Ezekiel, we have a substratum which makes this text clearer. Jesus is addressing a situation in which people are imagining that their deeds somehow are coming back to them in*

*the events which they then attribute to God. For those who are familiar with the traditions of Eastern Religions, this concept is also found in Buddhism or Hinduism, it is Karma. In the western world, among us Lutherans, we call it one of the manifestations of the Theology of Glory. The idea that my actions somehow cause God to react to me is really at the root of the error here. In the situation which Jesus addresses, folks are back engineering the karma. Something terrible has happened to a handful of people, a seemingly random event, but in the religiously charged world of first century Palestine or the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States, nothing is random. God must have singled them out for this event, caused that tower to fall on them at that very moment. The folks who brought their sacrifices and were killed at the temple that day were not just randomly at the wrong place, God caused them to be there because this is somehow their justly deserved end.*

*Jesus simply says that whole idea is wrong. We need to stop right here and listen to this. Jesus says that this whole idea is WRONG!! His rationale is not terribly comforting, mind you. All of us actually deserve the wrath of God. But by God's grace it does not happen.*

*Then we get this intriguing little parable of the fig tree, the owner and the gardener. I was always taught not to allegorize these parables, and not to make them into more than they really are. It is sage advice, but as you are probably already realize, I am going to ignore it, which should have you reading this skeptically.*

*In the parable the owner is clearly God, the fruitless tree represents the hearer, this creation of God, which is not as he intended it. The gardener, is that Jesus? I know that this is asking too much of the parable genre, but it seems to fit so nicely. This idea that the owner is justified in destroying the fruitless tree and that Jesus is the manifestation of another, patient, loving way of God, the heart of God which is in some tension with the justice of God. The Parable speaks of God's merciful forbearance winning that discussion which is internal to the trinity itself. There are those who will say that I have over read this thing. Perhaps you should listen to them. Robert Capon is a good resource on the parables, but so would be Art Just's recent Concordia Commentary on Luke.*

*To follow through on the parable however, is the mission of Jesus and now his Church described here, the careful digging and fertilizing of this otherwise barren and fruitless tree? Is that really what we are doing, giving the hearer and this this world once last chance to produce the fruits of repentance before God cranks up his eschatological chain saw?*

*Again, we are running a serious theme throughout these lessons. God does not want to destroy his sinful creation. The hope of Christians is not found in our ability to get this right, but in God's merciful forbearance. God does not want punish us. He takes no delight in the hellish end of sin, but he grieves for, continues to love, and works for the restoration of his lost, broken creation.*

*This week's readings seem intent on establishing this image of God. It would seem that we must preach it.*

## **Law and Gospel**

**Law:** I am a lousy excuse for a human creation of God. An honest appraisal of my own track record is dismal. I have frequently made vows to stop and have broken them. Surely God is fed up with me.

**Gospel:** God's love is not like my love. He does not ever lose it. God may be disappointed in me, but that frustration does not mean he stops loving. This is one of the profound mysteries of God.

**Law:** The whole system does not seem fair – I am supposed to be good, I get that. But it seems to be just impossible. It is a trap. God has established an unreasonable expectation, I cannot do this. How can he hold me accountable for my sins when I can do nothing about them?!

**Gospel:** God is fully aware of our weakness and failings. Remember he walked this earth as a real and live human being. This is why he comes to every morning with you. He offers you the possibility of real and substantive change and improvement in your life. He is not judging you for the past failings, but he is offering you his helpful hand today. You may not conquer that pet sin today, but he will take you one step closer. He wants that, he loves you, and he can work miracles you and I cannot even imagine.

**Law:** But so much of the world is about consequences and results. Causality drives my existence. I get what I pay for. Even the mechanisms of good seem to work this way. Karma just makes sense. Have you ever heard of the phrase "pay it forward?" In this system we do good things in anticipation of good things happening down the road. But even there, we count on the fact that something good will happen because we cause it to be. Jesus seems to be speaking of an alien world which I do not understand.

**Gospel:** You are right, your inability to understand is the reason God has given us this Bible, these parables, these stories from old days and the friends and pastors and fellow Christians of your story. Christ is not judging you for your misunderstandings any more than he is judging you for your misdeeds. But just as he pledges himself to work with you in resisting the temptations, so too he would open your heart and mind to see him as he really is. He knows that will be really good for you.

## Sermon Ideas

1. Do you think... (That the perfect love of God would drive out the fear in which begins wisdom but which true wisdom does not see as the end, replacing it with holy, humble, and honest joy.)

Jesus begins the Gospel reading today with some disturbing words. The folks around him have been reading their newsfeeds on their smartphones and noted something terrible happened in Jerusalem. Some religious pilgrims got caught up in the imperial machinery and the governor, Pontius Pilate, had them killed, mingling their blood with their sacrifices. Here were people who were apparently doing the right thing and they died.

Sounds like something must have been going on. The obvious implication from Jesus' response seems to be that the people who brought this to Jesus attention were thinking that somehow those folks must have deserved it. They must not have been true sons of Abraham if this happened to them in the middle of their sacrifices. They must have been ELCA Lutherans or something like that. Probably had one of those rainbow flags fluttering outside their church.

Jesus will hear none of this. He brings up another bit from his own newsfeed, did you hear about the 18 people on whom the tower fell and killed them in Siloam? They must have had it coming?

Nope! Jesus won't have it. You just cannot make those connections. A few years ago a tornado ripped through Oklahoma and decimated the Oklahoma City suburb of Moore. Amazingly, St. John Lutheran was left standing while much of the surrounding neighborhood was destroyed. A miracle, people exclaimed. Until a few weeks later when a workman, repairing the minimal damage made to the roof set the building on fire with a blowtorch and it burned. What then – did God miss with the tornado so he sent a workman with a blowtorch to finish the job?

The problem is not with the various interpretations of the events, the problem is with the interpreter himself. We are just not given to make those connections. Our human nature loves to make those. Resist that urge, says Jesus. Rather, fix your eyes on God and his love. The simple fact of the matter is that we all deserve the worst the world can throw at us. There is none who is righteous, no not one. We all have fallen short of the glory of God, so stop keep score already! God isn't.

Rather, according the parable which follows, God is doing something about this fundamentally flawed and broken world we live in. He sent Jesus. God has every right to cut down this miserable tree, this fruitless world, this creation in rebellion. But he doesn't. At least he has not yet. Rather he has sent Jesus and he has sent us into this

world. That day in which he fires up his chainsaw will come. Then none shall stand but by the grace of Jesus. All sin will be laid bare and we will know things as they really are.

But for now, tremble before his love. I don't know why the tornados and floods and cancers come to some homes and not others. There is no Word of God given to explain those events, only the sobering truth that we all deserve it and more. God stays his hand of judgment. The gardener, our Lord Jesus, feeds and waters and coaxes yet one more crop out of this church, this parish, this sinner, this world. Because he would not destroy it before he has exhausted every avenue of his mercy and love.

2. Even Me? Even Us? (that the hearer would be refreshed and encouraged by promise of God's love for him/her and this community of faithful people whom He has gathered into this place.)

Recently, in a book entitled "Unchristian," the Barna institute brought to light some truly disturbing facts about Church and especially the Christian community of North America. Young people hate us, they think we are judgmental, hypocritical, and in serious conflict with our espoused value set. (Never mind the fact that in saying these things they are committing the very sin which they deplore! I mean, don't you just hate judgmental people!) Their point is well taken: We don't look like Jesus to them, and that is why they are not singing his praises with us. Even the young people in the Church think this about us. They are there, most likely because of a relationship with someone in the building, but they are not planning on staying. The numbers for those who were active in youth groups and churches were not very much different from the young people who are staying away in droves. They responded the same way to the questions.

Have our own children looked at us as Christians and said "Yuk!"? The book asserts that in large part they have.

Demographics suggest that the book is correct. The average age of Christian congregations is dramatically older than the general population. We are grey, we are old, we have lost an entire generation of people.

God must be terribly fed up with us. He would have every reason to be. We really are the fruitless fig tree of the Gospel lesson.

Today, however, God speaks strangely to us. He does not utter the harsh words of condemnation we deserve, but he pleads our case, he offers his tender loving care. He walks into this day with us, so that we can do better. He has never stopped loving us, not even for one moment, not even in our very worst moments. That is true on a personal level, when individually we have descended into the pits of sin, and it applies to us corporately, as a congregation of God's people, when we have been unnecessarily harsh

or contentious. When we have fought with one another and presented the world with a bitter witness to a crabby and spiteful Christ who never existed, but whom we seemingly exemplify.

Not only does he love us, but he offers to do something about us. He starts shoveling the fertilizer, loosening the soil, watering us, so that we may bear fruit as we ought. It begins with his forgiving and loving deed, to us as individuals and to us as a congregation. He has born the sin of this world and you in particular on his shoulders in Christ. He has not simply removed that burden, however, but he has also pledged his personal help to make your life into a life which bears witness to his love. He knows how hard this is, so he makes himself present in our lives. When two or three gather in his name, he is there. When we break this bread we participate in him, his body. When we speak these words of forgiveness, he assures us that they are His words. When we strengthen one another with prayer and fellowship, with the sympathizing tear and the joyful celebration of milestones reached, he is right there with us. His presence empowers us, so that we may forgive and live a different sort of life, a life together which is infused with the very love he has for us.

The three lessons all give us an opportunity to work with this. In the OT lesson God speaks of his great love for us, that even the sinners are saved. God does not delight in the death of the sinner, he doesn't want us to fail, he loves us. Paul speaks of God going out into the world with us, faithfully helping us to overcome temptation, and when we fail, he faithfully is there the next time too. He just doesn't give up. The Gospel lesson speaks of second chances, the tree is given another chance, as today and tomorrow are for us.

3. An Authentic Witness (That the Holy Spirit would expunge from the hearer's witness to Christ any sense of pride or superiority over against the unbeliever, but that reveling in the unconditional love of God for all sinners, including self, he or she would be equipped to be a powerful witness of that love to others.)

The very notion of some superiority is antithetical to the Christian witness, but it is so easy for us to do. The fact of the matter is that we are all equal before God, equally guilty, equally forgiven. God shows no favoritism, there is no one, no not one, who can say that he has not sinned and fallen short of God's glory. (Romans 3)

Yet the spirit of the Pharisee is hardly absent from the Christian witness today. I heard this from a guy who was downtown in Portland not too long ago. He observed some group of young evangelicals on the city square with signs and bullhorns shouting "Repent or die!" to the folks who were walking past. It was offensive and grossly inappropriate. My friend was about to say something when the otherwise unknown little old lady who happened to be walking by looked at them and muttered in response to their demand,



“Sure thing, sweetie, I’ll get right on it.” It was so laughable that he simply had to let it go.

The Christian hears Jesus today tell us all that we are simply members of that band of humanity who line the roads of Judea and shout after him, “have mercy on us, Son of David!” We are with the blind and the leper and the tax collectors and prostitutes. We are one of the great and broken mass of humanity.

That is essential to our vocation as Christian witnesses. We dare not give the impression that we have somehow beaten the other to Jesus, rather we must admit that we needed him more, that is surely why we are bathed in his love and now empowered to speak for him. He always did hang around the sinners, scandalously so, surely that has not changed now that he is found with me. The fact that I have Jesus does mean I am better, it may well mean I am worse!

Such a witness is born of a deep humility, genuinely and honestly arrived at. As the Gospel says, we are perhaps knee-deep in manure. God is at work even in the really humiliating and difficult things. Such a witness is also born of an authenticity which cuts through all the self-seeking falderal of so much of what passes for Christianity. I am not building a congregation or some personal kingdom. Luther said we are all beggars. They were his last words. I am but one beggar telling another where to find a hot meal.

4. He follows us through the wilderness (That the Spirit of God would open the hearer’s heart to recognize the presence of Christ in his/her life right now.)

God says to the people of Ezekiel’s day that he does not delight in the death of the sinner – God is love. Our sins are our own, but love belongs to God, and he offers to any who repents. He just loves to forgive.

Paul, however, gives us the theme for this message. Jesus is a rock that follows God’s people around through the wilderness. God is faithful, like that rock that followed them through the desert of long ago. They were difficult and hard to get along with, but that rock kept following them, God never stopped loving them. We have often struggled with our own sins, but God has never stopped loving us. The next time we face that sin, though we have often succumbed in the past, God will be right there to help that day too.

And then Jesus comes to us in this amazing Gospel lesson. The fruit tree does not bear fruit, my how that doesn’t describe me and my life. The owner would be perfectly within his rights to crank up his eschatological chain saw and be done with me. But the mercy of God intervenes on my behalf. Jesus the vinedresser lovingly cares for and feeds me, and with every day another chance is giving, another opportunity provided. The tree eventually bears fruit, because of his tender care.

This presence of Christ is real – sacramentally real. It is not just a pious thought or a nice idea, but we are talking about a genuine presence. The Jesus who showed up in the upper room did not break in; he was there the whole time.

The preacher who is thinking about the presence of Christ may want to remember that the person who is going through the difficult time does not perceive the presence of Christ in the middle of the stress, but in looking back one can see his gentle presence in many different ways. You can assure the person going through garbage in his/her life that this feeling of God's absence is real and normal. That feeling is not a sign of his absence but a reality of your suffering. You have been there too, and you can also tell them that it will get better. There will come a day when you can look back on it and see him and his love again. This is not a license for the sinner to delay, but it is comfort for the suffering person.