

## **Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 31**

Let's back up and take a run at this one. The first week of Lent we heard about Jesus who conquers our foe. The second week of Lent we got the message of the cross. The victory of the first week might involve some pain, certainly for Jesus, likely for us too. Last week we got this glimpse into the loving heart of God. His methods, this cross which hurts so, is somehow tied to the very essence of God, to his love.

This week we get the goal of all this, and it is scandalous. God means to save the sinner, not just the naughty person, and yes that includes us. But he means them all. God's love is so significantly large that it extends even to people we loathe. The cross, the strange mechanism of God is such that there is no one who is outside its scope. The heart of God has room for every sinner. The victory Christ has won, he won for the whole of humanity.

This all sounds fine and good, after all, doesn't a large purple dinosaur sing for preschool children a song about love for me and you. But of course, this gets nasty rather fast. It is one thing to say that God loves all people when we are talking about the right sort of people, or for the hordes of people we don't really know, but when we start to talk about some folks we know or think we know, it gets hard. After all, we know that there are some folks who are beyond the pale, some whose lives are so nasty, so perverse, so utterly wrong, that they are out. But God has apparently not heard that little truth. He doesn't seem to play by our rules. He goes and does shocking things. Jesus hangs around with prostitutes and sinners, with tax collecting traitors. Who would it be today, the homosexuals and the terrorists, narrow minded mean spirited conservatives or liberals whose minds are so open their brains fell out? Would Jesus even find a way to love the politicians, congressmen, and the used car salesmen we mistrust so much?

The truth be told, God has some rather harsh words today for the folks who are sitting in pews. Too often we are pretty sure that there is a significant difference between ourselves and "those sorts of people." By the end of the Gospel lesson we find ourselves standing on the outside of the heavenly party grumpily looking in wondering what has happened to our church, our God, and our firm convictions that we are special while God celebrates with the people we loathe.

In the Epistle reading, Paul exhorts us to see this world totally anew, from a completely different perspective. They are all a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come. And he really does mean everyone when he says this. Just consider the opening words of this letter and Acts 17 if you don't see what I mean. Everyone, even the guy who tried to have the Romans kill Paul, is seen through the redemptive work of our Savior, not through the lens of sin. It isn't fair, not one little bit.

Isaiah speaks of what that sinner experiences when God's grace falls on him or her. "With joy we draw water from the well of salvation." After words of condemnation and judgment in the first chapters, Isaiah concludes his first section of his book with one of the most beautiful passages in all the Old Testament.

It is a day in which we will hear some of the most potent and wonderful passages of the whole Bible. Isaiah's chapter 12, Paul's admonition to forgiveness in II Corinthians, and lastly the parable of the Prodigal Son, or is it really the Forgiving Father, or perhaps it is really the Parable of the Unforgiving Elder Brother. Or, as Robert Capon suggests, it is the parable of the Fattened Calf who had to die so they could all have a party?

### **Collect of the Day**

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, Your mercies are new every morning; and though we deserve only punishment, You receive us as Your children and provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*God's mercy is new every morning. That means every day, every moment, we start with a merciful abundance from God. I wonder how often our people actually think this way. I wonder if they don't simply upend the horizontal relationships they share with their family and friends and turn them vertical and point that toward God. The horizontal relationships I have with my friends, my spouse, my neighbors, and others, relationships which are always bedeviled by history. Yes, I have gotten over the fact that my neighbor tried to build his fence two feet into my property, but it always lurks back there in my memory. I have forgiven my wife for what she said, but how do I get it out of my head? I may not ever be able to!*

*We discussed that this prayer is almost incomprehensible to many folks in its first elements. The moralizing therapeutic deist believes that God is distant, he is a grandfather whom you can call upon to send a check in an emergency, but not someone you talk to every day. God is therapeutic, like that grandfather, he wants you to be happy, but he is not going to impose something painful upon you, like rules, especially rules that would make you unhappy. Hence, if it feels right to sleep with that girl, it cannot be all that bad, God will understand, as long as I have not tried to hurt someone (moralizing).*

*The prayer however asserts that God's gifts first of all are daily. God is part of everything I have, including the breakfast I enjoyed this morning and the shelter which keeps my head dry. What is especially problematic for a lot of the students in my classrooms is that this gift of God is a merciful gift, not a matter of course, but a gift given to someone who really deserves something. They cannot see the grace of it. They cannot imagine why God would not of course love them.*

*If God's love is not mercifully granted to a sinner who deserves punishment, it must be given to someone who is fundamentally loveable. This leads to a particular form of spiritual arrogance. If they are not getting good from God, they must not be lovable, like me. That works as long as I am getting something good, at least better than that guy. It turns nasty when things don't go so well.*

*This prayer starts with the strange assertion that God is really good at forgetting things. Last week we peeked into Jesus' heart and saw his great love for the people of Jerusalem, he would gather them under his wings. Jerusalem is a perfect example of this human ability to forget. Everything in Jerusalem is predicated on some wrong perceived and done. I do this in response that thing you did. For centuries, even millennia these grudges are held. Not with God. His mercy is new every morning. It is like a waterfall of mercy. You get drenched but if you step back in, you get drenched again.*

*That mercy results in God's amazing generosity to us. He provides all our needs of body and soul. The body stuff is pretty easy to identify; although, we are prone to confuse the needs and the wants of our body. But the soul is so easy for us to ignore and pass over. God provides for our soul. We hold the very body of Christ in our hands at this rail, do we marvel at that, or do we yawn and wish the service got over faster. When this water touches our forehead, new life is bestowed, do we simply stop and wonder at that? I live in a Spiritual realm in which I am on the very bottom of the power ladder. But I blithely pass through life, unaware of the great forces that wage around me, because I am shielded by God's almighty hand. Satan is thwarted in my life every day, and the Spirit is so efficient at this, I am able to ignore it.*

*The prayer puts two things in exactly the right order. We first must, by God's working on our hearts and minds, be given to see and acknowledge all that God does and gives us. It is only then, when our lives are completely in his hand, in orbit about him, like some little satellite tethered to the mass of some sun, that we can actually serve him.*

*Then the prayer looks forward to a willing obedience. What is a willing obedience? That seems like a cultural challenge to us. It seems to suggest that we serve God out of an internal motivation, a joyful service. Our culture does not talk much about obedience, but usually reserves the term for instances when we are "obeying our conscience" which is a code word for "I am about to break the rules." In fact, that sort of obedience of conscience is truly a non-obedience.*

*Paul uses the phrase in Romans 1:5 that he calls gentiles to an obedience of Faith. Is that another way to talk about this willing obedience? Not an obedience of fear or reward, it is totally removed from the "buy/sell" mentality of those who would earn something from God or who would obey simply to avoid the big toaster oven at the end of time.*

*This is not a slavish obedience, not a forced obedience, but an act of service, an obedience which is joyfully and freely given, response to God, thankfully done. I think the closest we get to this sort of obedience is when we love our spouse or children and they love us. Is that why God makes use of the family metaphor?*

*Contrary to the way it gets depicted, this is not a brainless or spineless obedience, in fact it is an adventurous, exciting, respectful and reverential obedience. This is an obedience which born of the fact that there is something more than us. To revere is to be standing in the presence of*

*something bigger than me. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We have cheapened words like “awesome” or “incredible.”*

*Willing obedience is not having my life sucked out of me, making me into some sort of a zombie like automaton. Willing obedience is in fact having the rebellion sucked out of me, and replaced with an active and joyful presence of Christ. It is an adventure, a delightful way to live. We were not given a spirit of timidity, but one of power and courage. This sort of obedience marks a tremendous change in our outlook.*

*Too many time people who hear us use the word obedience, they only hear us saying “No” to the wrong things. They don’t hear us speaking positively of the things we are now free to do. I may forgive, I may love my loathsome neighbor, and I may serve and love the folks on the bottom of the heap and find value in the child.*

## **Readings**

Isaiah 12:1-6

You will say in that day:

“I will give thanks to you, O LORD,  
for though you were angry with me,  
your anger turned away,  
that you might comfort me.

<sup>2</sup>“Behold, God is my salvation;  
I will trust, and will not be afraid;  
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song,  
and he has become my salvation.”

<sup>3</sup>With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. <sup>4</sup>And you will say in that day:

“Give thanks to the LORD,  
call upon his name,  
make known his deeds among the peoples,  
proclaim that his name is exalted.

<sup>5</sup>“Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;  
let this be made known in all the earth.

<sup>6</sup>Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,  
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

*This is the whole of chapter 12, so you really don’t need to announce the verses really.*

*This chapter serves as the climax conclusion to the first narrative unit of the book. He starts out with a prophecy of gloom and doom, and then, hope starts to break. His own call vision is the*

*center point. It is a fascinating piece of literature and I encourage you to read the whole thing if you are really interested in this passage. The chapters right before this, 9 and 11 have beautiful prophecies of Christ that we often use at Christmas time, and of course, chapter 7 has “behold a virgin will conceive...”*

*Here Isaiah seems to be describing the emotional experience of the person who is given the love of God. In this sense, this passage is really a form of poetry and could stand in as a psalm or a worship song.*

*In verse one he seems to dwell simply on the awe of it. The person who gives thanks is standing in amazed wonder at God’s mercy. God was angry, he had every right to be, but he turned it away so that he might comfort me. That is really important, notice the subject of the verb here. God turns his own anger away so that he might comfort me. I did not turn the anger of God, nor did anyone else. God did this. And his goal was my comfort, not his justice, not some scale balancing, nor some act of tenderhearted compassion for a cute creation.*

*In verse two the preacher will want to notice that the praise of the person centers on God’s salvation act. For us Christians this gets really exciting because the word for “salvation” in the Hebrew here is essentially “Jesus.” Remember when Jesus gets his name? The angel says he will save his people. Isaiah is playing on that word from the other side of it. Now fear is gone, the whole world has changed. Remember Isaiah couches this in the time of the rise of the Assyrians. They will invest the city, surround it. In chapter 7 he said that the people’s hearts were all shaking like leaves on a tree when the Israeli and Syrian armies surrounded the city. This is some seriously good news.*

*Music suggestion: Jeremy Camp sings a great rendition of a song called “I will Trust In You” which is based on verse two of Isaiah 12. The author is Danny Daniels. Copyright 1987 Mercy/Vineyard publishing (Admin by Music Services) catalog Mercy/Vineyard Publishing ccli song number 106659*

*Verse three is simply marvelous and speaks for itself. We will draw water from the well of salvation. What a picture.*

*In verses four through six he puts the words of praise into our mouths. Notice the emotional content here. We do this with joy, thanksgiving, in response to his great and glorious salvation. We promote his name, we sing, for God is great in our midst.*

*This text is preachable.*

Psalm 32

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.

<sup>2</sup> Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

- <sup>3</sup> For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.
- <sup>4</sup> For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah
- <sup>5</sup> I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not cover my iniquity;  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"  
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah
- <sup>6</sup> Therefore let everyone who is godly  
offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found;  
surely in the rush of great waters,  
they shall not reach him.
- <sup>7</sup> You are a hiding place for me;  
you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah
- <sup>8</sup> I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
- <sup>9</sup> Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding,  
which must be curbed with bit and bridle,  
or it will not stay near you.
- <sup>10</sup> Many are the sorrows of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.
- <sup>11</sup> Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

*At some point I just want to tell the people who pick these pericopes to stop. Let me preach for a month or two on just these readings. Don't pack them all into one day! This is an amazing psalm. The psalmist describes what it is like, psychologically and spiritually to have an unconfessed sin. His bones waste away. The hand of God is heavy upon him. He is miserable. Then he describes the relief, the joy, of releasing those sins. Blessed is the one whom God forgives.*

*The second half of the psalm is the psalmists promise to share this gift. Could this be a sort of evangelism sermon? I think so. I do believe that some of the lethargy we see in many of our parishes is due to the fact that we just don't get forgiven all that often. We talk about it a great deal, but do we actually forgive someone? I am not so sure we do. Or if we do, I am not so sure people are hearing it/experiencing it. As a result they have little in the way of a story to tell when they go out into the world. "Come to church and drink bad coffee in the basement," is not an effective sales pitch. But "come to meet the one who makes me so happy!" is a message which draws the hearer.*

## II Corinthians 5:16-21

<sup>11</sup> Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. <sup>12</sup> We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. <sup>13</sup> For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. <sup>14</sup> For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; <sup>15</sup> and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

<sup>16</sup> From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. <sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup> that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

*This is one of the places where history really does make a difference. On the outbound leg of his third missionary journey, Paul received a letter from his congregation in Corinth. This was a special group for him. He had spent 18 months there on the second missionary journey, he had met Apollos and Prisca and Aquila there. But the letter was not a friendly update. It was a list of problems which needed attention. Paul dashed off a response and proceeded on to Ephesus where he would establish himself for three years as he raised funds for the starving folks in Jerusalem.*

*When he got to Ephesus he learned the letter had not had its intended effect. A delegation from Cloe's house was waiting for him. Perhaps they had another letter and they also spoke to Paul. In response he sent Timothy and a second letter, which we know as I Corinthians. The first letter he sent has been lost. Timothy came back and reported that the second letter was not well received. Paul went to see them personally. This was a disaster, he calls it a painful visit. They treated him shamefully, they got personal, and he left in anger, with feelings hurt. He sent a third letter, one he calls "harsh." He sent this with Titus. Meanwhile he is still about his fundraising mission. There are starving people to feed in Jerusalem. Titus' mission with the harsh letter is much more successful. Perhaps it was the letter, perhaps it was Titus, certainly it was the Holy Spirit, but in any event, they people of Corinth apologize and seek Paul's forgiveness and a restoration of the relationship.*

*Titus is so excited he cannot wait for Paul to return to the home base in Ephesus. He tracks him down in Troas and from there Paul writes his joyful response, a letter we know as II Corinthians.*

*It is actually his fourth letter in this correspondence, but we only have the two of them. This passage we have today is part of that response. (There is some thought that chapters 8-9 are actually his fundraising appeal to the parish and we are not entirely sure what to do with chapters 10-13. Some have wondered if it is not part of the harsh letter that has been smashed onto the letter – but no one really knows for sure. That is one of the places where history fails to help us.)*

*For our purposes today, it is important to know that some people who are terribly important to Paul, got into a fight with him, spoke very hard words and finally they were able to forgive one another. One of my friends in ministry speaks of the floodgates of love which are opened when a fight is resolved in Christ. Relationships which were strained are strengthened beyond what they had been before the fight. The reconciliation which the world knows can only, in the best of circumstances, get back to where you were. Most of the time what you get a relationship which is still fractured but sort of duct taped back together with understanding. Forgiveness gets you someplace more than where you were. The love which is expressed is incredibly powerful. I think we too often settle for understanding our neighbor's faults and do not actually forgive them. The result is that we never experience this floodgate of love, and run on the inertia of a relationship that is no longer really impelling us with joy. I have seen too many congregations which have forgotten how to love each other because they have forgotten how to forgive.*

*Paul has forgiven and his language in these first chapters of II Corinthians is effusive. Today he speaks of the mystery which that forgiveness in Christ. This forgiveness is so much more than merely understanding what someone has done or said to me or failed to do.*

*Paul means what he says here and the people of Corinth need him to mean it. They last time they had seen him horrible and hurtful words were said. Paul says that he does not see them through that lens, but through the lens of the cross. They are the new creation which he sees. They have hurt him, he has forgiven them. This is not Paul speaking in the abstract, but this is a letter to old friends who have been fighting. Paul means them!*

*Paul attributes all this to God. It is God who has empowered this in Christ. And it is God who has authorized Paul and us to speak these words of forgiveness, as his ambassadors. We are not just talking about things we would like to see, we are talking about the very things which God has done and which has authorized us to say. This is reality.*

*The scope of this embassy is huge. God has reconciled the whole world to himself. That certainly included the sins of the Corinthians against Paul and it surely includes our own sins as well, but it includes all sins. God has reconciled the whole world, and we are the ambassadors of that reconciliation. Through us he is making his appeal.*

*Paul is appealing to the folks in Corinth to be reconciled, to be one with him and with God again. This is actually the hardest part, not that I forgive, but that my audience really believe that they are forgiven, that God can do that, that God can just take that sin and nail it to Jesus'*



*cross and it is done for. We want to hang on to those sins, imagine that God really has a grudge against us, that he treats us like we treat other folks. But God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and his ways are not our ways. He really does forget them. They are forgiven. The debt is gone, totally gone.*

*Paul is screaming this truth to the folks in Corinth and you can see why. They have hurt him, they are feeling really badly about what they have done, Yes, Paul says he forgives them, but will he really be able to put this behind himself? The Gospel promises that yes we can see the world with these new eyes. The Spirit works a miracle in us. We can really forgive. I think we don't preach this promise enough. God's gift is a real gift which is right now something that makes our lives better. We can forgive people. It is a beautiful and wonderful thing. We don't have to understand the evil, nor do we have to accept it, or bear a grudge, or nurse some hatred. We can look evil in the eye, feel its full weight and pain and say "Jesus died for that." That word has power, and that truth has power to shape and change the world in which we live. Too often we have sought the solutions to our pain in therapy-land or pharmaceuticals. We sought to prevent the pain with constitutions and bylaws and by not getting too committed in the lives of others. But we ought to be confident in this world. We can forgive people.*

*This is another powerful sermon which needs preaching. But of course, our attention can almost not be taken from the Gospel lesson today. It is a great magnet which exerts tremendous force on the preacher and his audience.*

*What does it mean to see people according to the flesh? We thought it was largely about a competitive sort of life which was threatened by someone else, which always was in the comparison game.*

*We thought that the story of Paul and Sosthenes might make a great illustration. In Acts 18 Sosthenes tried to kill Paul as the leader of the synagogue, when that did not work his Jewish synagogue members turned on him. Paul, however, befriended him. Paul was not kidding when he saw everyone new in Christ. Paul lived it out radically – In I Corinthians 1:1 he calls Sosthenes brother – the very fellow who tried to kill him!*

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. <sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

<sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. <sup>6</sup> And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' <sup>7</sup> Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

<sup>8</sup> *“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ <sup>10</sup> Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*

<sup>11</sup> And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. <sup>14</sup> And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ <sup>20</sup> And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. <sup>27</sup> And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup> But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, <sup>29</sup> but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup> And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

*Context, context, context! This parable is only intelligible in light of its context. Jesus has two audiences as he speaks. He has the sinners who are gathered at his feet, the tax collectors, the naughty people. Who would these sinners be today? Since the Victorian era we have almost always categorized some form of sexually immoral person in those ranks. Interestingly, in the medieval period it would have been a proud person.*

*The other half of the audience are the scribes and teachers of the Law who are on the periphery of this scene, but whose complaint occasions this parable. They are not happy with the scene before them. Jesus is hanging around the wrong sorts of people. Self-respecting rabbis don't talk to these sorts of unclean folk. Jesus is making a mockery of their carefully crafted system which is designed to bring societal pressure to bear on these evil-doers so they can be reformed, brought back into proper religious society. They need to know that they have a problem, properly repent of those problems, and then, after a suitable period of penitential sorrow and having made sufficient satisfaction, they can be readmitted to society. Jesus is subverting all this by teaching and speaking with them. He even eats with them. The religious types are not happy. .*



*Jesus uncorks a trio of parables in response to this, and I really believe they need to be read in series. First he tells of the lost sheep, 1 out of a 100 which were owned by the shepherd. He diligently searches and returns joyfully with his sheep. He calls his neighbors together for a celebration. It is the interpretation which Jesus gives which is simply devastating. There is more joy in heaven over the one who needs to repent than over the 99 who do not need to. Our good Lutheran sensibilities immediately question whether anyone can not need to repent, but just let Jesus tell this, he will get to that point. Right now, hear and believe that he has told the sinners at his feet that God is happy that they are there; in fact he is happier about them than he is about the self-righteous crabs who are on the periphery of this scene.*

*Jesus then ratchets things up with a second parable. A woman loses a coin. The way he tells this has many folks thinking about a particular kind of coin. In any event, one needs to remember that there is no paper money in the ancient world. A coin could be of considerable value. It is likely, however, that this was a part of her dowry, a gift from her parents. This was her insurance policy in case something happened to her husband. She would have had it fashioned into a necklace and worn it every day. If you are ever in Kansas City with a little time to kill, consider going to the Nelson Art Gallery. They have a marvelous display of these necklaces which have*

*been found from the ancient Middle East. This would have had more than simple monetary value to her, it would have had emotional and security value for her.*

*She loses 1 of these 10. She diligently sweeps and searches the house and when she finds it, she also summons neighbors and friends to a party. They open a bottle of wine and celebrate. She has found her lost coin. Again, it is in the interpretation which Jesus gives to the parable that the real barb is found. There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one lost sinner who repents. The folks at Jesus feet now know that the angels are happy too. The folks with their arms crossed on the edge of this crowd have just heard that there is joy in God's presence, and their crabbiness means they are not in the presence of God. The servants of God are happy, and I am not, that means I am not a servant of God. This is getting worse for them. Not only are they out of step with God, now they are out of his presence.*

*Then Jesus tells our parable, the story of a man who has two sons. Notice how the ratio of the lost has gone up. 1 out of 2. Or is it 2 out of 2? Here the good Lutheran's complaint about all needing to repent will be answered.*

*The first son is a real piece of work. He does what is unthinkable in the ancient world. He is grotesquely disrespectful to his father. In the ancient world and in the Middle East today, one just does not do this. Fathers are kings inside their own homes and their sons must respect them. This is the very fabric of society. The boy asks for his inheritance, he cannot wait for his father to die. The Greek word for his "share of the inheritance" is related to "life" in the same way we speak of a livelihood as being one's income.*

*The father interestingly gives him what he asks for. This would have been difficult as the father would have had to sell property, perhaps take out a loan, etc. The younger son in this situation was due 1/3 of the estate. The elder got two shares of the estate so he could take care of the mother and other dependents.*

*The son is prodigal. That means he spends his money with reckless abandon. But the resources do eventually give out. He is reduced to working, and he takes a job no good Jewish boy would want. He must feed pigs and he longs to eat the pig's food. Finally he "comes to his senses" and that is really what the Greek says. He reasons that the hired help at least has enough to eat on his father's estate; he will apologize and ask for a job.*

*Of course when he arrives his father runs to greet him. This also is very significant. First of all, men at the time wore long robes, like a long dress. The only way to run in them is to hitch them up around one's hips. There simply is no elegant way to do this and men in the time were very image conscience. They might walk quickly, but they simply did not debase themselves by running.*



*Why does he run? It is because the last couple hundred yards of the son's journey home would have taken him through the homes of the servants and workers on the farm. They would have*



*known what he had done. They might have had their own jobs threatened when the brat ran off with 1/3 of the estate. It would not have taken too much imagination to think that they could make points with the old man by spitting on him, by calling him names, hissing at him, etc. The father pre-empts that. He runs by them, embarrassing himself. When he embraces the boy he starts shouting out commands: Get a ring, shoes, robe! Kill the fatted calf; we are going to have a party.*

*At this last command the ears of all would have perked up. We know from excavating the cemeteries of the period that many people were protein deficient. They got meat maybe about once a month. Without any way to refrigerate, they would eat this entire calf that night. This was your shot at protein this month.*

*The father has skillfully prevented anyone from scorning, spitting upon, throwing dung at, or otherwise despising this young man. Now, they must also celebrate or they won't get their shot at the roast. The father's behavior was most surprising for Jesus' audience. A good Middle Eastern father at the time would have left the young man who had behaved thus sitting on the door step for several days before he even acknowledged his existence. All the while those who sought the father's favor would have made their opinion known of this wastrel, quite often by dumping the chamber pot on him. But this father does the unthinkable, and yet any father who has watched for a son to come home knows that this is not so unthinkable. He loves him, and that love makes fathers do strange things.*

*The party progresses and the elder brother comes in from the field. He has been working hard in the father's fields. He is surprised to hear a celebration. He inquires and discovers that the joy is for his returned brother. He is livid. How can they throw a party for that brat!*

*The father then does something just as amazing as his welcome of the younger brother. He goes out to plead with the elder brother. In the ancient world when the father threw a party, the son had to come. Throwing a petulant pout on the porch is simply not allowed. The elder brother is in fact being just as disrespectful as the younger brother had been. (Notice the bit about who needs to repent. The Pharisees on the edges of the scene are being disrespectful like the elder brother.) Again the father loves and reaches out to his wayward son. Interestingly, Luke does not finish this story. There is no zinger at the end. The parable ends with Jesus' hands extended to the crabby Pharisees on the edge of the crowd. "Won't you come and sit down?"*

*This stunning! I really, really hate judgmental people! Now he is letting even those guys into the Church!? Surely he will make them stop being judgmental before they can be in, won't he? Surely they have to change their ways before he lets them at the table, doesn't he? Doesn't he?*

*I asked earlier who belonged in the crowd of sinners at Jesus' feet. Who are the people who are simply outside the pale for us? For a lot of Christians it remains the very same sexual ethics which was true for their parents. Perhaps the exact sexual sin has morphed from divorce or adultery into homosexuality or something else, but it is still in that general realm. For lots of folks outside the church, on the other hand, it is the very behavior of the churchly people. It is their intolerance and judgmentalism. But hating judgmental people is rather self-defeating, don't you think?*

## **Law and Gospel**

**Law:** I have a God problem. I know I sound like a caricature of those guys who stand up in AA meetings, but really I do. I simply cannot control myself or my life and I know that it is somehow really out of plumb with God. I may seem to be roughly on track with the rest of the world, but I have a serious God problem.

**Gospel:** God knows my problem and he has turned away his wrath which I deserved and instead acted for my comfort and salvation. He has sent Jesus, his only and precious Son. He has died for the sins of the world and paid their price. The problem has been born by himself, perfectly, justly, but more importantly, lovingly and graciously.

**Law:** Yeah, but I have such a hard time with this. My sins they haunt me, they won't let me go. I remember them. When I just start to think I am past them, I say something stupid and they all come rushing back at me. My mind is flooded with memories of the thoughtless, mean, and foolish things I have said and done. Why can't I be rid of them?

**Gospel:** You can be rid of them. God sees you and the rest of the this world in a totally different way now that Jesus has come, done his work, and taken up our humanity. He has pledged his Spirit and his help for you. You cannot do this, it is true, that is why even this will do with you and for you. You will be his partner in this, he will not force you, you may even lend a hand once in a while because he loves that, but the final product is always in his hands. He will give you his eyes to see yourself differently.

**Law:** There are some seriously messed up people in this world. It is easy enough to say that God loves everyone and think about the teeming masses of India or China or something like that, but it gets really tough when you start talking about that guy at work who really annoys me, the neighbor whose motorcycle starts up at 5:30 in the morning, or the other guy whose house looks like dump and is driving everyone's house values down. It can even be harder when it is my brother-in-law or the woman who snared your daughter into a lesbian relationship. There are some people who are really hard to love.

Gospel: God used to think that way about you too. But he loves you, and he gives you and me that same sort of love. There is no sin, no hurt, no atrocity about which we cannot simply say, “Jesus died for that.” It doesn’t mean it does not hurt, it doesn’t mean that I am tough, but it means I don’t have to get even or carry a load of hate in my heart anymore. I can start to see even the loathsome folks as people. They get hungry, they are afraid; they are just as prone to cancer and heart attacks and arthritis as the rest of us. Their kids get picked on sometimes in school and their parents die like ours do. Seeing them this way is simply a much happier way to live, I get fewer ulcers and my face has fewer frown lines. The people I loathe are all just people for whom Jesus died too.

Law: Wait a minute here. This sounds subversive and dangerous. You mean that there are no standards and no rules? God loves all so we can just do whatever we want? Don’t we have to enforce some structures here? Don’t we have to reign in the more destructive elements in our society? Would you empty the prisons and forgive even the bank executives?

Gospel Yes, it is subversive, but not like imagined above. The radical love of even the enemy would transform the mighty Roman Empire with a few hundred years of Jesus’ death on a cross. But Christianity did not let out all the prisoners or stop the wheels of justice. Real love also acknowledges that real evil exists, we will still protect the weak and the helpless, we will discipline our children, and tell the wrongdoer that he has done wrong. But we will not hate them for it. In fact, we will come to the moment of conflict with a strange and hopeful joy. For we know the power of forgiveness and God’s love to transform sinners. After all, we were a sinner, still are, but now that we have drawn from the well of salvation, we just cannot hate that way anymore.

**Phil’s Essay on Forgiveness** – *Three years ago when we discussed this, the brethren wanted to talk about the very nature of forgiveness and found this discussion to be helpful. Does it still resonate?*

What is forgiveness? The word comes from the banking realm. It is what banks almost never do for loans. They can forgive a loan. When a loan is forgiven, it goes away.

It has a close tie to another banking word, reconciliation. When I reconcile my check book, I am bringing two different accountings into balance/parity. When I reconcile through forgiveness, what I am doing is forgiving the debt owed. Forgiveness is...saying about any hurt, every hurt, any sin, every sin, “Jesus died for that.” The account is no longer in arrears.

First let it be known that there are two kinds of forgiveness. There is the forgiveness I speak to the sinner, the forgiveness I articulate. Then there is the forgiveness I may experience only internally. It is a poor substitute for the first kind, but it might be all I get and it too is blessed by God.

When I say “Jesus died for that, thus I forgive you” He eliminated the debt. It is essential when talking about forgiveness for the forgiver to acknowledge that a wrong has been done. This is why “understanding” is poisonous for Christian forgiveness. In the best of situations the sinner also acknowledges this so I can speak that forgiveness to them. But that is not always possible. Sometimes sinners are particularly obstinate or oblivious, and sometimes they are simply dead and I cannot speak to them. In those cases I can still tell myself. “Jesus died for that.”

When I say “Jesus died for that” it means many things which might not be immediately apparent. If Jesus died for the sin, I don’t have to get even. I don’t have to bear a grudge, I don’t and won’t be tough about it, or carry it around in some psychological gunny-sack which is slung over my shoulder. (A sack which I will likely empty at some family reunion or other gathering.) Forgiveness always involves saying no to these other solutions to my hurt and pain. You cannot forgive and exact revenge. You cannot forgive and bear a grudge, they are simply antithetical, opposites.

Forgiveness also means I am able to love this person again. This is the problem of understanding. It doesn’t really help me love them. It just makes us all stinkers. Understanding would say that I would have done the same thing in the same situation. So we are both wretched. But forgiveness actually does something about the hurt. It applies the blood of Christ. It means I can treat this person in light of what Christ has done. Please understand, this may not mean that all just like it was before. This is not forgive and forget – this means I remember the sin still, but I remember it always covered in the blood of Christ. I remember it “red.”

Example: The battered wife has gone through years of abuse at the hands of her husband. She has finally come to the point at which she cannot take it anymore. What does this look like for her?

First of all, this will not be a simply, one moment “forgiveness” and then walking away from it. Secondly, however, when we exhort her to forgive, we are offering her a way to live which is freedom. She does not need to understand this sin of her husband. She doesn’t need to find any excuses for it. She can simply call it evil. She also is freed from some need to achieve justice in this. She does not need to make him pay. Jesus has that in his hands. He will handle that.

What we offer to this woman is the ability to say about every abuse, every hurt, every moment of terror and every awful day, that Christ’s blood has been shed for the whole of it. She does not need to carry this with her. Now, the reality is, she will carry this with her, but we offer these healing words. When the terrors arise, when the memories come crashing back, she can beat them back with the simple phrase, “Yes, but Christ died for all that.”

Forgiveness does not mean that she is obligated to forget this. In fact, she will hopefully remember it “red.” She will remember that it is something that Christ died for. She does not have to like him. She does not have to accept what he did as acceptable or understandable, she can simply say about it, “it is paid for in the cross.” What Jesus will do with him, is Jesus’ business



now. I can simply treat him as I need to treat him. That means I will protect my personal safety. That means I will protect my children and provide for them as best as I can. I am not obligated to make him change or repent or anything else. Jesus died for this, it is in his hands.

## **Sermon Ideas**

1. **Ambassadors of God's Reconciliation** (That the Spirit of God would empower the hearer to see the world through the eyes of Christ's new creation.)

This is really an action sermon, a sermon which, if the hearer really believes and takes this to heart and life, will enable them to live a totally different sort of life. We enjoin them to the radical sort of forgiveness which Paul is practicing in the Epistle lesson today and which Jesus describes in the Gospel lesson. But don't forget the OT reading, Isaiah there describes the beauty of being the person on the receiving end of this. That picture is critical to motivation here.

I envision this sermon really being a "how to forgive your brother" sort of sermon. You would do well to use the imagery of the prodigal and the situation of Paul here. Both stories are rich enough that you don't need much more illustration but you will want to have handy some contemporizations of this motif.

Forgiveness is something we don't really teach people today. We talk about it, but we don't really do it. First we have to say that forgiveness does mean that something wrong has been done. There is a right and a wrong, moral relativism destroys forgiveness by taking away any need.

Secondly, forgiveness always involves saying no to a number of things. I won't get even, nor will I bear a grudge. Vengeance solves nothing and grudge bearing is quite self-destructive. I won't be tough about this either, and insist that I am above the pain. That does work sometimes, when the wound is slight, but when it is right to the heart such a method fails us. Nor will I try to understand what the other has done. I think this is the most common solution we try for sin. If I were in that man's shoes, I might have done the same thing. But that does not take away the hurt or the sting. That does not make it right, only is the honest admission that I could do the same. Such humility is good, but it is not forgiveness.

Forgiveness is saying that this hurt, this sin, this problem, is something that Jesus died for. I won't get even, Jesus has evened the score. I won't bear a grudge, why carry something that he has borne? I won't be tough, he has died. I don't have to understand it. Evil is often banal, I will instead forgive it.

Jesus has died for this, and that means I will see it differently. I may not be able to forget it, at least not for a very long time, but I will pledge to “remember it red” covered in the blood of Christ.

In order for this to really work, we also have to hold up for folks the real blessing that this is. Forgiveness does not merely paper over the problem, but it solves it. Forgiveness allows broken relationship to be restored. Forgiveness is a powerful way to make our congregation and our families, and all our relationships stronger. Forgiveness is simply sweet. Here is where the Isaiah text seems to come in for me.

Forgiveness is always a risk. It is not a guarantee of the restoration of relationship. It may even be perceived by the person who is forgiving as a form of vulnerability. The person who forgives will be eschewing the guarantees which are born of “getting even” and the satisfaction of at least nursing a long cold grudge against the person. Rather it almost must run the risk of being hurt again. It doesn’t mean that I need to be stupid about it and put myself in harm’s way, but it also means that I am not going to set up some fortress in which I cannot ever be hurt again. That is not life.

Forgiveness is the absolute abandonment of all hope for a better past. It is the beginning of today, with today.

2. We draw water from the well of salvation (That the hearer would simply revel in the graciousness of God.)

We will preach the OT here, but we can scarcely not use the Gospel as the illustration of our point. Both sons receive the love of the same Father; albeit differently in each case. Yet they both are loved by him. The prodigal is perhaps easier for us. We have rather made heroic the stock figure of the son who rebels against his father and runs away only to make a mess of himself. This father is understandable to us, admirable. It is the elder brother whose rebellion is more difficult and perhaps more pointed for us. His refusal to admit the love of the father is just as problematic as the sin of the younger son. He is just as rebellious, but in a different way. The father comes out to him, and the story ends right there. God is coming to us today, inviting us into the festivities for the sinners of every time and place. You see, he even loves crabby old Lutherans, in fact he loves them a great deal.

I think the preacher will need to point out that we do look like that brother too often, especially to the folks who are outside the church. At least that is what they tell us. What should be a beautiful community where sinners are forgiven has been portrayed as a spiteful, judgmental community which fights among itself, excludes the sinner, and never lives up to its own moral code. Who would want to join such an organization?

Isaiah sees something else, does he not? How would that look today if we drew our water from the wells of salvation? This sermon will want to cast the vision of a community in which forgiveness is the very life blood of our congregation. It might be very disturbing!

3. Won't you come in? (That the Spirit of God would move the hearer to cast off all judgmentalism and offer the sinner Christ's forgiving love.)

This sermon will use the parable to preach some of what Paul says in the Epistle reading. The powerful story of the Parable of the Prodigal and Elder Brothers is so familiar that the preacher may well want simply to tell it slowly, but the theology of the parable is really also found in the Epistle reading. The older brother sees his younger brother through the flesh, the old way of seeing things. But Paul enjoins us, as Jesus enjoined the Pharisees and scribes to see the tax collectors and sinners through a new paradigm, a paradigm which has tremendous transformative power for our fellowship as a congregation.

The sermon will recast the vision of what sort of relationship God has created in this place through the gifts of his sacramental body and blood. Remember, Paul sees this new vision based on the death and resurrection of Christ. (the reading prior to the text today) Because Christ has died for all, all have died. This "therefore" leads to the new way of seeing all people in Christ.

We could use the Sosthenes incident to illustrate that Paul is not kidding here. He really means just what Jesus is talking about. Paul was nearly killed by Sosthenes in Acts 18. In I Corinthians 1 he calls him a brother.

Is this sermon potentially too long?