

Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 19

Ok, so what exactly is Jesus doing these days? Some time ago when we were wrestling with the aftermath of the Boston bombings, one of the Tuesday night group, Armenio Pineros, was challenging his group to pray that Jesus help his students say no to all the negative temptations which filled their lives. Do we even think to ask him for such help? Do we even imagine that Jesus is doing something like that right now?

I have asked the question about what Jesus is doing before, but it is always worth returning to. My primary reason for saying so is that many who sail under the banner of Christianity are functionally deists. They assert that there is a God, but he doesn't do much for them, at least not now. In this line of thinking, God did some powerful deeds in the past, but the last few centuries have been pretty quiet for those counting miracles. The preacher of the Kingdom of God, the resurrection preacher, has to challenge this. If God is distant and not at all immanent in the world in which we live, I think we really might as well hang up the alb. So we ask:

What is Jesus doing right now? How would we know? Why is it even an important question?

For many Christians today, Jesus is important mostly for the distant past or the distant future. The past is known through the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life. The future is only perceived through the cloudy veil of death and usually the murky language of Revelation. His presence in this world and in this time and place is hard to see and harder to articulate for us. There is clarity to saying he died long ago for my sins. There is a hopeful expectation but also a measure of imagination required when we speak of what he will be doing after we die and on that last day. We often imagine that last day to be when we get to see the Jesus we rather wish we could see right now.

But the Jesus of right now, the Jesus who has risen from death to live and reign with God the Father over a kingdom of which I am right now a citizen, that Jesus of Nazareth, is a living and real presence to his people right now. I often joke with folks who argue for contemporary worship and ask them what the alternative is? Historical worship? Is that where I forgive your sins in the past tense? Speculative worship, sort of a sci-fi experience in which everything is futuristic? I then remind them of the goofy musical band in the Star Wars movies which always seem odd to me in that it provided comic relief. I know that I am really just yanking on their chain about this. They mean a particular genre of music when they speak of contemporary, but I wonder what contemporary worship really means. I think that if any worship is not contemporary in the theological sense, it is really devoid of all its grace and power and beauty, no matter the genre of music we play.

Our texts portray Jesus doing a number of interesting things today. In the first lesson Jesus, through outpouring His Spirit on the uncircumcised gentiles despite their preferences for ham sandwiches, upsets the Jewish Christian world. Jesus prods his church out the door into uncomfortable and unfamiliar territory and conversations. By pouring out the Spirit on real

gentiles, folks who have not observed the Torah rules about diet, circumcision, and Sabbath keeping, God has made the Jewish Christians anxious. They are silent when this happens and, finally, reluctantly admit that if God has done this, who are they to argue with God. But you can really tell that they would rather that God did not do this. Jesus is making me uncomfortable today for the sake of the mission of his church. How is he doing that? Does he put a homosexual, a criminal, or some other person into my paths so that I cannot ignore them? (I heard today that there are 20 million Americans with felony convictions outside of prison – looking for work and not finding it. Is that a field ripe for evangelism?)

The second reading from Revelation, at first perusal, seems like a description of that distant future, that far away day when Jesus comes again in glory and reveals himself to us for our eyes to see. But as you read down, the conversation turns not to future things but to now things. Jesus is making all things new, an ongoing, present sort of action. All things are being made new, even my things, even me.

The Gospel reading for today speaks of this time, when the Spirit is poured out on us, the days between Pentecost and the Parousia. Jesus likens this to the time of labor for a woman. There are tears and there is pain and there is exertion, but there is also new life, and great joy. Jesus admits that his disciples without that Spirit cannot bear what he really wants to say, but with the Spirit they will be able to. Think about that. The Spirit has come, so we are able to bear those words. Jesus has made us able and ready and equipped us for this day to meet it with deep and profound joy.

What is Jesus doing today? We worked on this list in the past. Can you add to it?

1. He is feeding the hungry folks in countless church basements and fellowship halls which have a ministry to the homeless and hungry. He is stitching countless quilts which are shipped all around the world through LWR.
2. He is in the nursing home where chaplains and Christians visit and talk to the folks, or the prison, or the military base, etc.
3. And is he in the hands and care of the nurses, CNA's, and others who serve the folks in the nursing home, hospital, or other place where hurting and lonely people get care. Could he even be in the unbelieving doctor or nurse who actively denies the presence and blessing
4. Jesus is in the rescue workers who show up at the scene of disaster or tragedy.
5. We might point to the presence of Christ in the simple acts of our family and friends.
6. Could Jesus be in Congress? Nehemiah suggests that God used a very politically savvy character to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem! Will he be in the LCMS Convention this summer?

7. Could Jesus be in Martha Stewart? Esther saved the people of the Persian diaspora by hosting dinner parties.
8. The other Simon among the disciples was a “zealot.” In today’s terms he would have been a form of terrorist. Does Jesus still associate with people who make me nervous? I spoke with a fellow briefly who is conducting an online ministry to the members of the Alt Right – the neo-Nazis and others who infect so much of the darkest corners of our society today.
9. Jesus in the conflict which is tearing my congregation apart. Does he speak both Law and Gospel? All things work for the good for those who believe. In the midst of the thing we see as terrible, can we have our eyes opened to see Jesus even on an evil day? We referenced Esther a couple items ago. She was selected to be queen of Persia through a beauty contest of sorts. But the contest involved the king having sex with the participants and choosing the one he liked best. These were likely teens. By all modern standards this is abhorrent. Was God raising up a savior for his people even in something like that?

Collect of the Day

O God, You make the minds of Your faithful to be of one will. Grant that we may love what You have commanded and desire what You promise, that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, Our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God makes the minds of his faithful people to be of one will. I am waiting with some eager anticipation for that voters meeting, I have to admit. What about a convention, what would that look like there?

But notice that the minds are not made to have the same thoughts or even the same strategy; they are given the same will, the same goal, the same desire. In the midst of a convention year and with an election cycle next year, it is tempting to think that this is an eschatological hope, something that will only happen at the end of time.

I have seen this truth play out in congregations. I believe there is no greater indicator that a congregation has lost its sense of mission than when its members start to fight with one another. When the congregation becomes focused on its building, its fellowship, serving its own, and loses the joy of sharing the Gospel with broken sinners and seeing the newness of life therein, it becomes a sour place, often filled with petty squabbles and a spirit of strife. We simply were not meant to be self-serving people. God unites us in His will that all people hear the good news, be united with Christ in his death, and be the sheep of his flock. When we are about that task, I am not terribly concerned what color we paint the nursery or just who it is whom he leads to join me in that task. I am glad for the help and much more concerned that the kids in the nursery are getting what they need.

The will which we share, we share with Christ. As a disciple we are subordinated to the will of the master. We follow him. That means we sacrificially serve and give of our selves. To be united in God's will seems to be rooted in his will that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, that all are made disciples, given that relationship of faith.

Again we get this strange request which shows up several times over the year. We ask God to grant us to love what he has commanded and to desire what he has promised.

There are a couple of ways to understand this. One could be praying that we love the things that God has commanded us to love: the sinners, the neighbor, the whole world for that matter. But there is another way to see this as well. We could be called upon to love God's commandments. He tells us to go out and feed the hungry, restore the sinner gently, spread the good news, care for the needy, teach the children and adults, and much more. Do we pray here that we would love doing those commanded things? In this sense the prayer would be that God would enable us to love what he has commanded us to do, not doing them as some drudgery, but as a pleasure.

And then, the second phrase asks that God would enable us to desire what he has promised. Is that in some contrast to loving the things he has already given us? Or is it that we might be tempted to love the things which he has not promised to us but which perhaps our sinful hearts might otherwise desire. Or is this perhaps dealing with the sense of disappointment that people sometimes have when they look at what it is that God has promised. They want a God who comes in and smashes the evil doers, but instead God promises to forgive them and make them our brothers and sisters in Christ. Like Jonah I would much rather he just burn Nineveh to the ground, it would be so much easier than this whole reconciliation and love thing he has promised to work through.

The goal for this prayer is that our hearts be fixed, cemented in place, the place where true joys are to be found. What do you suppose that looks like? Is that what today's sermon needs to be about? Where are these true joys found? What does that true joy feel like, look like? How do I get some of that, even just a little bit of that as my life seems sometimes to be so short of true joys? It seems that the joys I have are often hardly the true sort.

Augustine would say that we ought to use everything to enjoy God, but only he was worthy of our enjoyment. Anything else was idolatry. My heart is restless until it rests in God.

If we love what the Lord commands, we love the one commanding, and we love the one the lord would have us love in terms of a neighbor. There is a real mystery here. Love in response to a command is not actually love. Please don't try this, but imagine giving your beloved a bouquet of flowers and, when she thanks you, muttering something about obedience to a commandment. That will not end well. When love is commanded, keeping the command is to break it. Love that loves in response to a commandment is not really love – but at the same time, God commands us to love. There is something odd and mysterious in all this. God is love, even the command which he gives is a creative word from him. He creates the relationship which loves.

Love perhaps needs a little definition. Love in the biblical context is an action, not just a feeling. It is an action taken in word and deed. Often our heart will follow our hands in this. If we treat the neighbor with loving deeds and kind words, we will soon find that our heart will have the kind and loving feelings. Conversely the evil and the hateful deed will often lead our hearts to hateful and evil thoughts. It might be helpful to think of loving as the deed which leads to the emotion. Now, commanding to love might make more sense. If I love the homeless man by acknowledging him, giving him the clothing, shelter, food, etc. which he needs. I will no longer be able to have a hateful emotion for him.

Readings

Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ³ “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” ⁴ But Peter began and explained it to them in order: ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. ⁶ Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. ⁷ And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸ But I said, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹ But the voice answered a second time from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. ¹¹ And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. ¹² And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³ And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’ ¹⁵ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?” ¹⁸ When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

The collect of the day urged God to fix our hearts on the source of true joy “amid so many changes.” This reading is really about what changes and what stays the same. The Jewish Christians needed to see the distinction because apparently some were thinking that nothing would change, but in that assumption they actually were changing the one thing that could not change, the very heart of God.

So Peter ate with Gentiles, the equivalent in our society, especially LCMS society, might be standing up, robed as a preacher, with Baptists, Calvinists, even Papists, to pray for a community like Boston or Newtown or Aurora. President Harrison has urged us to talk about this. Our DP, Paul Linnemann in the Northwest District has also asked us to talk about it. Should this text be one which guides us in this discussion? I think so. Are we more concerned about our purity/unionism than Mt 28?

This is a marvelous missional text. In the prior chapter Peter saw the vision which he recounts here. He went to Cornelius' house, as he tells the Jews, but he leaves out this marvelous scene which Luke recorded for us there. He walks into the house, Cornelius has assembled his entire household, children, wife, servants, everyone. Peter walks in and Luke carefully notices that there are some other Jews who have come with Peter. Peter is very uncomfortable walking into this gentile's house. They all stare at each other for a moment and Peter asks what they want. They in turn say that they were told Peter had something to tell them. It is a very awkward moment that Luke masterfully tells. Peter tells them the basic Jesus narrative and when he gets to the end of the story, telling them that he is a witness to these events and commissioned to tell these things, the Spirit of God falls upon Cornelius' household and they start manifesting the Spirit through speaking in tongues. Peter turns to his fellow Jews and says, "who can deny them baptism now that God has done this."

Peter was right to feel a little awkward in this moment, he was also wise to have brought along the fellow Jews as witnesses. As we read in this pericope, soon some inside the community criticized him for this and he has to appear before the assembled apostles and leaders of the early community to defend what he has done. He has baptized Gentiles. That in and of itself is not a problem, but these Gentiles are not following the Torah and have no intention of following the Torah's proscription of pork, work on the Sabbath or other things Jews found detestable. They are not keeping the Law of Moses as the first Christian Jews thought was necessary. They are not living out the Sinai covenant with its peculiar dietary and other restrictions.

The proof in this instance was not argued out from Old Testament scriptures as Paul does in Galatians, nor was there any appeal to the teachings of Jesus, simply a statement of the fact, "God did this – they spoke in tongues – they had the Spirit of God." Then Peter remembers what Jesus said about Baptizing with the Spirit and simply wonders aloud who was he to stand in God's way?

This is greeted with silence. This is enormous for the folks who are gathered in that room. Some will simply not accept it. Paul will have to deal with that crowd for decades as he writes Galatians, Ephesians and other letters. They would never be able to accept that God could love a human being who ate ham sandwiches. The Jewish Christian community would maintain its identity as Torah keeping Christians for another 300 years or so, with the last sizeable group dying out in Edessa. Today there are a few new messianic Jews who try to keep the Torah as

Christians, but the vast majority of Christians do not. It would seem this text is speaking to another generation and people.

But not so fast. God is still prodding his church out the door and into awkward and difficult discussions, often with people we think are outside the pale of his kingdom. How open are we to the prodding of God? Do we sometimes quench the Spirit's still and quiet voice lest we appear "Pentecostal" or "Charismatic?" But does the Spirit still prompt us? Does he still compel us?

God's vision is so much bigger than ours. There is no sinner out there for whom the blood of Jesus was not shed. There is no human being out there who is so lost God cannot love them. There is no repulsive lifestyle, no heinous crime committed, no personal darkness so deep that the love of God cannot break down the walls and work his new life in that person.

The really scary part about this is that he uses us to do that kingdom work. It would be so much easier if he would just let us be the church to ourselves, in our nice quiet German sort of way, socializing with people like us, serving with folks who have the same values and history and outlook on life. But God envisions something else for us, something much more exciting, dangerous, and gracious. He found Peter on the rooftop and called him down into a Gentile house. He could have sent some angel to Cornelius but he sent Peter instead.

Where is God pushing us out the door into uncomfortable places? Peter did not want to be there that day. If the Spirit had not visibly manifested himself that day, if God had not commanded him to be there, he would have stayed in Joppa, enjoying the hospitality of Simon the tanner. Where do we see the Spirit of God in strange places? Do we see him in prisons and among prisoners? Have you ever been surprised to find a homeless man or woman to be far more pious and spiritual than you are? Have you ever even talked to a homeless man or woman? I think that sometimes we might be surprised at how spiritual some who walk the halls of our public schools really are. My father remembered being surprised to find a woman who was living with a man who was far more faithful to her live-in boyfriend than many of the spouses in his parish had been.

Of course we also see many times when churches are suddenly changed – an emigrant community has come in and suddenly there are more of "them" than there are of "us." When the community converts from a good middleclass German/white/Lutheran sort of place to a community filled with people of another race or tradition, we can feel very uncomfortable. Is that Jesus pushing us out the door a little bit?

Psalm 148

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;

praise him in the heights!

² Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his hosts!

³ Praise him, sun and moon,
praise him, all you shining stars!

⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!

⁵ Let them praise the name of the LORD!
For he commanded and they were created.

⁶ And he established them forever and ever;
he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away.

⁷ Praise the LORD from the earth,
you great sea creatures and all deeps,

⁸ fire and hail, snow and mist,
stormy wind fulfilling his word!

⁹ Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!

¹⁰ Beasts and all livestock,
creeping things and flying birds!

¹¹ Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!

¹² Young men and maidens together,
old men and children!

¹³ Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his majesty is above earth and heaven.

¹⁴ He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his saints,
for the people of Israel who are near to him.

Praise the LORD!

The verse in this Psalm which I think you want to look at is verses 11-14 in which the psalmist finally, after running through the whole of creation, gets to the people, and includes all the kings and all the people, everyone. This will be important for the Acts reading especially, but also the Revelation reading.

Revelation 21:1-7

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of

heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶ And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. ⁷ The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. ⁸ *But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.*”

I thought the final verse was essential here. We drop it off, but if you look at the end of the book of John, the very next chapter, you might want to reconsider that idea. It is politically correct, I suppose, but is it really safe?

We might notice that two of these readings are focused on visions. Could any of us stand before our congregation and say that we have had a vision and here is what we ought to do? Have we limited Christ’s work among us? Have we caged the Holy Spirit a little bit? Do we think that God only works one way and not another way? Do we have a call here to a little more demonstrative sort of faith? Do we have a call here to speak of God working more actively in our lives? John has a vision here? Are we too beholding to the enlightenment to allow this in our midst? What if our congregational members shouted a “halleluiah” once in a while?

In Revelation 21 John is given two visions of the New Jerusalem, this is the first of them, the second begins immediately after this. The second vision involves the massive cube shaped city which has reminded Star Trek fans of the Borg for decades now.

This text starts off with a strange statement. John sees the new heaven and the new earth, the old has passed away, there is no sea. What has he got against the ocean? I rather like the ocean. The interpretive point here is that the sea was known as a place of chaos. In fact the Hebrew word for the “formless and void” earth in Genesis 1, (tohu w’bohu) is etymologically similar to the Akkadian word for the evil dragon their hero god slew in their creation epic. Her name was Tiamat which means “chaos.”

Because the Israelite coast line never did have any harbors, they never developed a maritime culture or industry. The Phoenicians of Tyre and Sidon to the north of Israel developed that culture. The Jews did not trust the ocean; they feared it, called it chaotic and dangerous.

He sees the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven, like a bride adorned for her husband. The next vision is of the brick and mortar stuff that makes up a city. This first vision seems to me

to be the real stuff of a city. This is the people he sees coming down, dressed like brides, ready for their wedding day, in their finest. This is not the city of buildings but the city of people.

The loud voice declares that the dwelling place of God is with his people. He will wipe away all the tears, there will be no more sorrow or death or anything of the sort. The former things have passed away, the old and dying world, the cemeteries and the memorials, the hospitals and the fire departments, the police bureaus, even the IRS. It has all passed away. Hence the people are dressed in their most beautiful clothes and ready to celebrate.

Then the one who is sitting on the throne declares in a loud voice that he is making all things new. It is the Garden of Eden restored to the people of God. Paul spoke of seeing people as a new creation in II Corinthians 5.

The message is one of hope for John's persecuted people. The person who stands firm, who conquers in his language here, will be in this band of festive-clad people. Important to notice here, that it is God who makes everything new. John is not laying some burden upon them, but speaking of God's great action on their behalf. He keeps them firm, he sustains them. he makes them his children, he gives them water to drink from the well of life.

It is a serious misappropriation of the text to think that the new heaven and earth means God does not care about this old heaven and earth and we are free therefore to abuse it.

This passage seems to be much more about the restoration of relationship with this creation than it is about the remodeling project. The sea which is banished is not so much about God's distaste for a day at the seaside, but it is the element which the Jewish people understood to be in most active rebellion against the organizing principle that is God.

John 16:12-22 *an option for the gospel reading is below.*

¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

¹⁶“A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” ¹⁷ So some of his disciples said to one another, “What is this that he says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and, ‘because I am going to the Father’?” ¹⁸ So they were saying, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.” ¹⁹ Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, “Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, ‘A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me’? ²⁰ Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.

²¹ When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. ²² So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. ²³ *In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.*

²⁴ *Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.*

Jesus is speaking these words in Chapter 16 of John, shortly before the betrayal in the garden. In chapter 17 he will pray his beautiful prayer for unity and Judas shows up in chapter 18. The disciples could not bear all that Jesus had to say right then, but now, John's readers, the contemporary disciples, they can bear it. For the Spirit of Truth has come, he came on Pentecost, and he came to you and me on the day we were baptized. He guides us into all truth, tells us what is to come and glorifies Jesus. He does this by taking what is Jesus' and giving it to you.

The preacher might just want to do a sermon on the Holy Spirit today and what he does. John's original audience had the Spirit, as do we. They were ready for the whole load of Jesus's teaching in a way that the disciples in this narrative were not. That is John's point here, I think. He was often facing an opponent who said that there was a secret or further knowledge of God which was necessary. John is really trying to say that with the outpouring of the Spirit, the information is complete now. You have it.

I have often likened the Holy Spirit to an extension cord. The cord makes no electricity but is essential for the whole process of getting the radio to make music. The Spirit does not die on the cross for my sins, he does not make the forgiveness I need, but he connects me to Christ. He does this through my five senses, when I touch the water, taste the sacrament, hear the word. I see the smile on my loved one's face as she forgives me and I also see His smile. I even remember as a child how the scent of wine clung to my mother as she resumed her place beside me in the pew. I was in the presence of something holy.

This Holy Spirit takes what is Jesus, and declares it, gives it, to us. This is the very act of absolution; it is a divine thing, a sacred word in our ears. Remember last week, when we hear, he knows us and we follow him?

Jesus tells his disciples that they will not see him, they will grieve about that, and then will see him again. Typically they don't get it. I find it interesting that John uses this little device. Clearly he thinks that his readers are in better shape. They have heard and understood what Jesus says.

Then Jesus re-uses one of the favorite metaphors for the Bible to describe the emotional state of a Christian – they are like a woman who is about to give birth to a child. She is sorrowful, but also joyful, and when she holds that baby in her arms, all the sorrow is forgotten. The joy of holding that child simply overwhelms it. (My wife also credits the fatigue factor for making the whole thing a bit of a blur.) But my wife's recollection aside, Jesus is pointing us to a valuable

truth in this whole thing. The sorrows of this life will be matched and exceeded by the joys. If it was not worth having the kid, our specie would have long ago simply died out.

In a very real sense, Jesus has spoken to contain or manage our sorrow about this whole world. He gives us hope. This sorrow we feel right now is not the end of this story nor is it even the dominant emotion in the big picture. The dominant emotion is joy, a joy no one, nothing can take away from us.

But he also gives us permission to weep. The sorrow, the pain, the suffering, the rest of the crap that the world throws at us is not dismissed, any more than a woman's labor in childbirth is dismissed. (Or at least, make sure you dismiss it from a distance, like far enough away that she cannot reach you with the rock that is lying at her feet. I speak from personal experience here.) The Christian who is enduring the sorrow is not told that the sorrow is not real or that it is inappropriate for us to feel it. It is real.

Jesus also does something else with the sorrow, it gives it meaning, not necessarily explaining it, but he puts it into the larger picture. The travail of labor is not meaningless pain, it is very purposeful; a new life is being born. It is a very beautiful thing, despite the pain. It is a very good thing. The Christian's sorrow is also put into that great life giving work of God. I cannot tell you exactly how it all fits together, any more than I can tell you exactly why labor hurts so much. Some things make sense, others do not. I know an obstetrics nurse who tells me that at a certain point in the process of labor a woman often becomes really angry, quite often at the father of the child. She says it is almost like clock work, and it seems to be driven by a cascade of hormones and chemicals that her brain is releasing. At this moment otherwise loving and sweet women will shout things at their husbands which they would never dream of doing at any other time. Why? No one really knows. But all of this is part of a process of giving birth to a child. Likewise, the sorrows of the Christian are part of God's salvific plan for this world. I can tell you that martyrs often bore a powerful witness to Christ and as a result many came to faith. But I cannot tell you why your best friend is dying of cancer right now or why you have not found a job or why young men plant bombs at marathons or why fertilizer plants blow up in Texas. I don't know. But I do know that Jesus takes our pain and sorrow and somehow connects it to this life-giving work of his.

Optional Gospel reading: John 13:31-35

²¹ After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." ²² The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. ²³ One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side, ²⁴ so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. ²⁵ So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" ²⁶ Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷ Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." ²⁸ Now no one at the table knew why he

said this to him. ²⁹ Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the feast,” or that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰ So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once.

³³ Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ ³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

³⁶ Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.” ³⁷ Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” ³⁸ Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.

This Gospel reading comes at the end of the chapter in which Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and falls right between two important paragraphs in John’s Gospel and I think that reading or preaching this out of this context is not a good idea. In the first paragraph we have Jesus speaking of betrayal and Judas leaves to do the dirty deed. Satan enters Judas and he leaves for his appointment with the leaders of the Jews.

In the paragraph which follows, Peter makes his foolish boast to die with Jesus, a boastful promise which he will fail to keep within hours of making. Jesus knows it. He knows where Judas is going, he knows what Peter will fail to do. He knows.

It is sandwiched between those paragraphs we get this one. Jesus speaks of his glorification. In John this word is really important and counter-intuitive. The Hebrew word for glory is קָבוֹד (cabod) which actually means heavy. Students of the language suppose that heavy or fat people were the wealthy, the glorious ones in the community and that is how this word came to mean this. I think theologically there is a better answer. God’s glory is not found in his absence but in the physicality, the weight, of his presence. When the glory of the Lord is found in the OT, it is in God’s great acts of salvation, most especially the Exodus, when he was present for his people leading them through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

Jesus says he is glorified, that does not mean he becomes more ethereal or somehow higher, it means he will become heavier, the dead weight of a corpse on a cross. Do you know what that cloth which hangs looped around a cross on Good Friday or Easter morning is really for? That clothe was a sling which made getting a body down from a cross easier. The dead weight of a human corpse is quite difficult. Jesus intends to become very heavy. He will be heavy this way because Judas will betray him, because Peter and all others will abandon him.

He will leave he says, but not leave. The disciples cannot yet come with him but he will not abandon them. He will be present in their lives through the love they show one another.

We get these words today because Ascension Day is right around the corner. Jesus will ascend and we will see him no more, at least not that way. But we will see him. We love as Jesus loved, as the Father loved. When the world sees this love the world sees him! This is our identity and our witness.

Law and Gospel

1. Jesus can sometimes seem like a reality for the distant past or the distant future, but not now. Right now seems so mundane. The person sitting next to me in the pew is off key on every hymn, I ripped my pants on the way out the door, there is gum stuck on the car's upholstery, the kids fought all the way to church, etc. But Jesus asserts that he is here right now. His Spirit has been poured out on us, we have the presence of Christ, he is making all things new, he is in this sacrament, this word, this fellowship.
2. Sometimes that distance from Jesus is particularly acute, especially when life gets not so mundane – like when it hurts a lot. Then it feels like this world is very far from heaven's glory and peace and joy. Where is Jesus on that day? The strange thing is that often, on those darkest of days, I come away feeling the presence of Christ most profoundly. As I reflect on my life, it is in those moments when he shows up most clearly.
3. Sometimes I really wish Jesus would stay away. He can make me very uncomfortable. He has a way of upsetting my cozy little world in which I have things nicely arranged for myself, filled with the right sorts of people and the right sort of things to do. But then he lowers a sheet down into my line of sight and declares clean the things I thought unclean and he pushes me out of the door of my cozy little ecclesial world and into the mission field which I find uncomfortable as I am rubbing shoulders with strange people. But there, in the crowds of strangers, I see his face staring back out at me. He is present there to gift me with his love, his heart, his eyes, and his Spirit.
4. Sometimes, when I take my eyes off of him, and look into this world and all its problems, many of them as near as my own life, I just want it to go away. I despair. I lose hope. On that day Jesus sits down beside me, and points up to the sky. He tells me about the people who will walk down across that sky, a whole new earth full of people, who will live right here, but not really here, because he is making all things new, even right now. He gives me hope.
5. Sometimes it is hard to love my neighbor, it is hard even to love myself. But Jesus has loved them both. He will be glorified, made heavy, slain, for me and them. We both have need of this Jesus and we both get this Jesus. That gift is now driving my life and charting my course.

Sermon Ideas

1. He makes all things new (Revelation - That the Holy Spirit would open the life of the hearer to see and participate in the newness which God is working now and in the future.)

This sermon will work off the idea of newness and what it is that the resurrected Jesus is doing right now. For a congregation which is weary or which has perhaps already started to move off the celebration of Easter and into the things of life, this can be a good reminder and an important call back to see with the eyes of God. It also may challenge the congregation which is focused on its decline and/or problems to see the same tired old world through the eyes of the one who died and rose to make it new. It will be important for the congregation to see that the world, including my old self, is desperately in need of this renewal. Hanging onto the old and limping along with its broken reality will just not do.

Integral to this sermon will be the notion of the now and the not-yet, a wonderful tension which permeates scripture. We are right now the children of God, made fully so by our baptism, and yet we know that the old man clings tightly to us and our mirrors often don't bear that reflection. We are now and not yet the children of God. The same is true of the world in which we live. It is now the fully redeemed kingdom of Jesus. We live in the kingdom and rejoice that its proclamation of peace and forgiveness ring out. At the same time, we watch the news, listen to the doctor, fight with our family members, etc., and encounter the old broken world which is clinging to us.

We could try a number of ways to reconcile this, but we dare not reconcile this in the end. We could say that this world is old and the next world is new. But that is not how Jesus talks about it. If that was the case, why heal the sick? Why save the life? Why should he have shed this old world's blood? He died to save this old world too. We could say with those in Corinth (I Cor. 15) that this world is the new world and this is as good as it gets. (This is largely the answer of many who are beholden to modernity.) But that also is not how Jesus talks about it. He points to the problems and speaks of Godly solution. We are left with the strange tension. This world is now and not-yet the Kingdom of Jesus.

The preacher won't have to go too far to find this at work. Forgiveness itself could be seen as simply acknowledging this tension. I forgive the man or woman who has hurt me and repented. They are still the stinker who has hurt me. At the same time, as Paul says, I see them new and I see them forgiven. The preacher should have at least one or two stories in his reservoir about those sorts of things. Jesus really does make things new, even now.

But we want to take these new eyes and look at the whole world, for that is what the readings call us to do. Peter is given to see the gentiles with new vision. They are still eating the ham sandwiches which his Judaism forbids, but God's love has transcended

that. They too are brothers and sisters in Christ. Here is a new relationship which old Peter could not have imagined. Jesus is making all things new for us too. Jesus' death was not just for the folks I approve of and it was not just for the people like me.

That newness can also be applied to breaking down the cynicism to which our age is attracted. The current political cycle, the recurrent news cycle, the cycles of addiction and poverty and more can leave us with the idea that nothing ever changes. But it does. God does make things new. I am studying for a Luther class I have to teach next year and am reading an interesting book called "Brand Luther" by Andrew Pettegree. He notes that Luther and Melancthon were early advocates for educating girls. In the middle of the sixteenth century, the region of Brandenburg, an early adopter of the Reformation had an equal number of girls to boys in their many schools. Venice, on the other hand, had many schools, but only 0.2% of Venetian school children were female. Does Jesus sometimes make something new? Yes. Is that same Jesus making new things today? Yes! Preach that Jesus who has risen from the dead so you can be part of seeing this old world through his new eyes.

2. Jesus makes me uncomfortable Acts 11 (that the hearer, like Peter and Cornelius, would experience the missional vision of Christ for the lost people of the world, be moved out of their zone of comfort and into their zone of gifted service for the Kingdom of God.)

The preacher of this sermon might want to build on the image of the Good Shepherd sermon of last week. Shepherds often ask sheep to do difficult things, they cross streams, climb hills to summer pastures, and go on long walks through dangerous places. This sermon will challenge the complacent congregation to see the neighbor anew, to go someplace that might not be entirely comfortable.

What are the challenges of preaching to the comfortable church?

- a. Burned out folks who are weary of serving. "We are too old!"
- b. Cliques of folks who really don't need more members, we are content with the way things are. Peter's critics are pretty tight.
- c. We often imagine that the way we do things is the only way to do things. (This is what Peter's critics are saying to him.)
- d. Fear of change
- e. The past was really good; we want to go back to that. Our vision is often very limited. Peter needed to be told three times!

This sermon is for the congregation which Christ is calling to think anew or again about who they are and why they exist. The first thing to say is that Christ cares about them. He has always done things this way and our unease about the future and the present is not a sign that he has left us but an opportunity for him to help us. But this is Jesus' church and

not our church. He will move it and like Peter's experience this may not be comfortable. That said, He also will use the gifts of the Spirit to do this. He won't ask you to be something he has not equipped you to be. What we also need to understand, however, is that these gifts of the Spirit are uncontrollable. Preachers and parishes have a tendency to want to contain/control these gifts. But that doesn't work. He does what he does.

If you read earlier in chapter 10, Peter was in prayer, a lot of prayer, and God's answer to his prayer was to take him to a very uncomfortable place, conversing with a gentile. Then, when he could not deny the work of God any longer, he did the right thing. He was willing to change his mind! But when he got home he discovered that there were folks who did not like that. We find him defending himself against those who think the kingdom ought to look another way, a much more traditional Jewish way.

But the deciding factor is not what they think or what Peter thinks, it is the Spirit of God who defines the mission for the Church. When he falls upon the folks in Cornelius' house he is saying something to Peter and the rest of the Jewish folks. These are God's people too. He loves them, he has died for them, we are all together the children of God. Isn't it great that He did this to Peter?! After all, aren't we all the beneficiaries of that day? Who is following the kosher laws among us? Yet, God loves us.

That same Jesus is pushing us out the door of our churches and into the equivalent of Cornelius' house today. We will not find this easy, any more than Peter did. We will meet with opposition within the body of believers; you can almost count on it. We will make mistakes – you might just want to point out Peter's slip up in Galatians 1 in which Paul had to reprimand him. But Christ is with us and he changes stubborn hearts and reforms silly people for amazing work in his kingdom. Just read Peter's letter to the persecuted Christians in I Peter and marvel at the mature, pastoral, and gentle Peter who writes loving and beautiful words of hope and joy for the gentile Christians in Asia Minor just a few years after this.

Christ likewise has given us a good mission. If it is a well written statement, you might try reading the mission statement of your parish. He is still loving the same folks out there, he is raised from the dead because he cares for all humanity and our hands and our eyes and our lips and feet have all be given the opportunity to participate in that great saving work. This is a rare and great privilege. God has invited us into the very center of his kingdom. Our risen and shepherding king is here today, perhaps to make us a little uncomfortable, but to do so because he wants us to be his ambassadors to this community.

Here the preacher might want to cast something of a vision for what this might mean for your parish. You might want to send the people home to pray like Peter did and then see what happens. You might just sign them up to pray for this for the next several weeks, until the feast of Pentecost and then come back and see what happens with that.

Challenge the guys in the parish to lead their families in prayer. Give them a prayer to say, put it on the bulletin insert.

You might already be in the thick of this controversy in which case this sermon might be a way to contextualize and contain the very struggles you are having.

3. The Jesus who gives me unquenchable joy (From the first Gospel lesson: that the hearer would rejoice in the presence of Christ, even amid the hardships and sorrows of this world, for Christ is with us.)

This sermon is for the community which needs to simply believe that Jesus is not a past or a future king only, but also a present shepherd king. This preacher should be ready with an example of what Christ is doing right now, a person who has come to faith recently, a story of someone who has encountered Christ in a meaningful way, a story from recent events in the news or perhaps a story from within your congregation.

The goal of this sermon is that the hearer would rejoice over this presence of Christ, with the joy which Jesus promises us in the Gospel lesson. That Joy is a joy which happens alongside the sorrows of this life, amid the travail, it does not necessarily replace the sorrow nor should the preacher preach it that way. In the lesson Jesus likened this joy to a woman's labor. I would go with that imagery. It speaks powerfully to people, especially anyone who has had a child, but be a little careful of it. It also can be a dagger in the heart of a woman who could not have a child.

This sermon really seeks to put the sorrows of this world into a healthy place. We do not deny the grief, nor do we say it is meaningless, but rather we baptize it. God has given meaning to suffering in a strange way by dying and rising himself. Now, though our eyes cannot always see him, we have Christ with us far more intimately and beautifully than the Disciples did long ago. We have him through the Spirit poured out in our baptism, a constant presence, never leaving us.

4. Christ Jesus, Glorified (Second Gospel reading: That Jesus Christ would manifest himself in the loving words and deeds of the hearers)

This sermon is really a sermon which hits the Christian life as a witness to Christ and especially to the love which the Father has for all in sending the Son and pouring out the Holy Spirit.

Jesus, in John 13, gives us all a new command, which is really an old command, but it is new too. It is old because the Torah had long since commanded us to love God and neighbor. Love was not new in this command, it has always been part of the deal for those who identify with God, whether they called him Yahweh in the OT or Jesus in the NT, same God, same demand for love.

What is a little different is just how the loving happens, or perhaps better said, who does the loving. The OT's injunction to be like God in loving both God and our fellow human being has grown more intimate and more direct. Now we love as God loves, with God's love. He loves through us.

Jesus says this is all part of his glorification. Here the preacher may want to just stop and talk about that word – see the discussion above. Glory is not only about light and majesty and brilliance, the sorts of things we usually identify with glory. In Jesus language glory meant heavy, real, substantive. The Father glorifies the Son in the cross, in the moment when he is more “real” than any other time. There is no denying his physicality when Joseph and Nicodemus tenderly lower his body to the ground and solemnly have it carried to a newly cut tomb. Jesus is very heavy, he is very real. He is glorified.

But that is not the end of the glorification of Jesus. He speaks of it continuing. He is risen, he has not left the humanity behind in the grave but brought it with him. Now with human heart beating, with hands and eyes and the rest of his glorified body he rules and reigns. But that glorified body is not just in one spot, it is wherever two or three gather in his name, even in this place. We are the body of Christ, we are his weight, his heft, his real presence in this community.

Jesus says that in our love, people will recognize and see God himself. We will bear witness to him, to Jesus, in the feeding of the hungry, in the gentle words, in the caring deed, in the welcoming hug, and the forgiveness of sins. Jesus is glorified here among us. The resurrection is proclaimed – Jesus lives.

It is very interesting that these words of Jesus glory, of the death and resurrection, of the new command to love are actually found between two important stories. Right before these words Judas is identified as the betrayer. He walks out to make his dreadful appointment with the Jewish leaders who will arrest Jesus shortly and the trial of Jesus will begin thereupon.

Right after Jesus speaks these words, Peter makes his foolish boast about being willing to die with Jesus. Christ notes that before morning he will break that promise, not once but three times. We all remember the story – Jesus is right, Peter is wrong.

These words we have heard are not Jesus being foolish, but Jesus being very real. He speaks these words sandwiched right between the foolish and evil betrayal at the hands of his best friends. Jesus is not condemning your failures of love today. Your people probably are as they listen to you though. This sermon is not such a condemnation, but a statement of God's great forgiving act and creative love. Look at the first reading today and what Peter did. Look at the second reading and see with John's eyes as the great hosts of God, dressed like a bride, in their finest, come to John's field of vision. They are

the people who have seen the witness, they are the one's whom God has saved through the love of his people.

The preacher may need to take note of the fact that we often have failed. Our own conscience will convict us. We will remember the angry words, the hurtful deeds, the painful moments. They are real too. But is God's love more real? Do we proclaim a reality which speaks a new thing to this situation? This only works when we speak out of a place of forgiveness. God has not loved us because we got it right. He has loved us despite what we have done.

Where do we see Jesus in action today? Do we need to remember that list which is at the beginning of these notes in the initial essay? Do we see him in the nurse and the little old ladies who are sewing quilts or the neighbor who is helping out down the street? Does he show up in our hands and feet and faces that way too? Of course he does.