

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – July 1 (Proper 8)

One of the great cultural divides between Christians and those who are outside the faith, especially those who frequently exhibit some antipathy to the Christian Church, is the question of God's love or sometimes couched as the problem of evil. For the person outside the faith, they question the reality of God and his love. They look at the death and destruction which surrounds them and they wonder if there is a God and if there is a God he surely must be a cruel and terrible God. How we talk about God's love will profoundly impact the way we interact missionally with these folks.

If you have not ever explored the Problem of Evil, I suggest you do. It is a philosophical question which has exercised academics and has recently penetrated deeper into the public consciousness through authors such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Much of what they write is philosophically churlish and childish, but they gain traction among a population who have not been educated or exposed to rational and spiritual alternatives.

The problem of evil is an ancient question raised before the birth of Christ by a Greek philosopher named Epicurus who was an atheist and thought that this life was all one got. (Paul seems to be responding to this line of thought in I Cor. 15.) The most cogent and clear modern articulation of this would be a mid-20th century Australian philosopher named J. L. Mackie who asserted that one of these three tenets of theism has to be in error.

1. God is Good
2. God is Omnipotent
3. Evil Exists.

Mackie said that if God was powerful and good then evil should not exist. Either he does not have the power to stop the evil or he is not really good. Or what we think is evil is not really evil. He could find no way around this dilemma. There are many Christian responses to this. C. S. Lewis takes it up in several of his works and modern Christian theologians have also written extensively about it.

For most Christians, on the other hand, we are not asking the question of the Problem of Evil. The really important question of life is whether God's love is really for me. Christians rarely doubt the reality of God's love, but they wonder if God can really love someone like me. We have hit that theme before in our sermon studies, but it is one of the core themes to which the Scriptures, our Faith, and our Sermons therefore return us regularly. Does God really love me, even me? The readings today, especially the OT and Gospel Reading but also the Epistle from Corinthians will address this question in some way or another. Of course the answer is a resounding "Yes!" but getting there can be an interesting journey and the occasion to learn a

great deal of God and find interesting ways to enter into the real lives of our parishioners and people.

Since we will most likely be preaching to Christians, we start there, but we cannot ever lose sight of those folks with whom we will interact the rest of the week, the folks who wonder if God is a God of Love.

There are lots of ways to ask these questions of ourselves and many ways beat ourselves up about the answers we imagine must be applicable to us and others. In its grosser form, this is despair, really a strange form of pride. My sins are greater than God's love and forgiveness. It is a perverse sort of pride to say such a thing, as if my guilt was so great that God could not do something about it. While I have run into this sort of thinking both in myself and in others, I find it is rare. What is more, I believe such an attitude to be a sign of significant oppression by the evil one. He has so darkened this person's vision that he/she can no longer see the Light of the World. When you are in the dark, there is little you can do to change this. This calls for someone to come and shine the light of God's love and to do that as the community of God's people together in this person's life.

More often I have encountered people who are like the greyhounds at the dog races. The mechanical rabbit is always just out of reach, spurring them on to greater effort. They feel that if they have to do something to be worthy of God's favor. They have not really grasped the real depth of their sins, but they know that they have a God problem on their hands. So they will teach their Sunday School classes, volunteer to set up for the Easter Breakfast, take their kids to every sort of camp imaginable in the summer, attend church, and much more, but always have a sense of disquiet about them. They are never quite there. The nagging voice of their guilt just won't leave them alone.

The tragedy of this is that their service rendered to God is tainted by all of it. God loves a cheerful giver because God himself is a cheerful giver. That is what it means to say he is gracious. And while he surely uses the guilt driven offerings that people bring and he even finds a way to bless us in giving them, he really is after another sort of service, a service which comes from the heart joyfully serving God. When you have only guilt, how does one change one's motive for service?

Some have had this inherent unworthiness ingrained upon them that they simply cannot stop doing something. I know a woman who cannot let her adult children honor her and give her anything. In her mind it just is not right that she should be the object of their attention and service. At one family gathering on the occasion of her birthday, she was simply unable to let them serve her. It was actually sad to see. She denied her children a gift they wanted to give her, an honor they wanted to show to their mother. She does this, I know because she has told me, because she simply feels unworthy, it is an unwillingness to be a perfectly forgiven person. She

can never turn from the sinner that she remains to see the saint whom God has created in Baptism. She feels that if she doesn't keep that sinner front and center, she is not really a Christian and she feels her salvation is in doubt. This has robbed her of much joy and her children the opportunity to keep the fourth commandment. How do you change this? If this is you or someone you love? What can one do about this?

Others come at the same issue from another direction. Putting faith in something other than Christ, be it the collar they wear or the membership they claim, they find a false security in things which turns to jelly beneath them. When this foundation crumbles in a day of stress or strife, when their sinfulness surfaces in some grotesque way, they find that they are standing on nothing lose all hope. This is also a terrifying place to be. How do you fix this? You cannot. Jesus can.

For the folks who are out there critiquing everything that the Church does, such behaviors and attitudes appear to them to be simply another form of the religious psychosis. Religion is the problem because it saddles folks with unnecessary guilt which in turn deforms their lives. There is something to the critique. The preacher will want to preach toward health here, a spiritual health which keeps in a productive and healthy tension the Law and the Gospel, the sinner/saint dynamic. For Luther he would express this as a despite theology, a theology which spoke of God loving me despite who I am. He contrasted this with any sort of a theology which spoke of God loving us because (ergo) of who I am. That latter is the theology of Glory.

Collect of the Day

Heavenly Father, during His earthly ministry Your Son Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead. By the healing medicine of the Word and Sacraments pour into our hearts such love toward You that we may live eternally; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Does Jesus still raise the dead and heal the sick? The prayer seems to suggest that the healing of Jesus is no longer happening or it could be read that way. We count on the healing of our hearts and spirits in the Word and Sacrament. But do we count on Jesus to heal our bodies? Has the enlightenment taught us that such healing is not from God, but is instead a natural process which pharmacology and medicine can help along? Is Jesus behind antibiotics?

Is this a case of our fear of some Pentecostal flavor? Are we afraid to say that Jesus heals today? Do we immediately want connect Jesus' healing and resurrecting recorded in today's Gospel reading to the Word and Sacrament ministry of the congregation? I do believe that they connect, but does the healing ministry of Jesus continue to this day? My own ministry has witnessed people who have been healed through no means which a doctor could explain. Was it a miracle? I think so.

But we also might point to the miracle of modern medicine. Jesus opened the eyes of the blind. How many people who would not be legally blind today can see because we have been given to understand vision and correct its defects with glasses, surgery, and other means? Is Jesus still opening the eyes of the blind? I think so. He just uses ophthalmologists and others.

In the past when we discussed this text our Lutheran alarm bells went off at the last phrase We thought the last part of the petition sounded a little on the works righteousness side of things. Does God reward our love for him with eternal life? That doesn't sound right. But the love is a gift as well. God has poured it into him. We cannot gin up that love, but it still made us a little uncomfortable to think that God was reacting to something we did. What is more, we wondered if the average parishioner would make that distinction.

'That we may live eternally' also sounds a little odd to our ears. Of course it refers to heaven and that is a good thing. But Protestant Christianity has been rightly critiqued for focusing our attention on heaven to the detriment of our focus on this life. We are not only interested in the hereafter, but we are also concerned for the here and now – especially the needs of our neighbor. Just what is eternal life and when does it start? It seems that it starts in our baptism and is lived right now. The preacher may want to keep that in mind.

Readings

Lamentations 3:22-33 This passage of Jeremiah's Lament is part of a larger poetic piece which I am providing here. If we are to read the verses in the pericope we have to have some context. Jeremiah begins the chapter lamenting the place to which God has brought him. It is clear that God is the source of his sorrow even though he has used the instrument of the Babylonians to do it. Notice the vividness of the imagery here. His skin wastes away, Jeremiah wears heavy chains. God is a bear lying in wait for him. God has bent his bow and aimed at Jeremiah and filled his kidneys with arrows. Remember the Babylonians have just conquered the city of Jerusalem. These are images which would be vivid for the first readers.

*¹I am the man who has seen affliction
under the rod of his wrath;*

*²he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;*

*³surely against me he turns his hand
again and again the whole day long.*

*⁴He has made my flesh and my skin waste away;
he has broken my bones;*

*⁵he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;*

*⁶he has made me dwell in darkness
like the dead of long ago.*

⁷ *He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;
he has made my chains heavy;*
⁸ *though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer;*
⁹ *he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones;
he has made my paths crooked.*
¹⁰ *He is a bear lying in wait for me,
a lion in hiding;*
¹¹ *he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces;
he has made me desolate;*
¹² *he bent his bow and set me
as a target for his arrow.*
¹³ *He drove into my kidneys
the arrows of his quiver;*
¹⁴ *I have become the laughingstock of all peoples,
the object of their taunts all day long.*
¹⁵ *He has filled me with bitterness;
he has sated me with wormwood.*

In these next verses Jeremiah brings the Lament to the real problem. He has lost hope. He could endure all the suffering if he had hope, but he has lost it. It seems to be pointless. He is bereft of peace. He has forgotten what happiness is. But in the next section he begs God to remember. In Exodus God remembered his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and sent Moses. In Genesis God remembered Noah and sent the wind to dry up the waters. When God remembers good things happen. God's remembering gives Jeremiah hope as he remembers God. He calls God to mind and therefore he has hope. Our passage is the content of that hope.

¹⁶ *He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;*
¹⁷ *my soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is;*
¹⁸ *so I say, "My endurance has perished;
so has my hope from the LORD."*
¹⁹ *Remember my affliction and my wanderings,
the wormwood and the gall!*
²⁰ *My soul continually remembers it
and is bowed down within me.*
²¹ *But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:*

- ²² The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
²³ they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
²⁴ “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.”
- ²⁵ The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul who seeks him.
²⁶ It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.
²⁷ It is good for a man that he bear
the yoke in his youth.
- ²⁸ Let him sit alone in silence
when it is laid on him;
²⁹ let him put his mouth in the dust—
there may yet be hope;
³⁰ let him give his cheek to the one who strikes,
and let him be filled with insults.
- ³¹ For the Lord will not
cast off forever,
³² but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
³³ for he does not afflict from his heart
or grieve the children of men.

The rest of the Lament speaks of what God has done to the people but now the suffering of Jeremiah and his people is recast. Yes, the temple is still destroyed and they have suffered terribly. Their suffering, however, is not the just chastisement for sins. But that also means repentance and restoration is possible. Hope! Jeremiah pledges himself to that repentance that the LORD would look down from heaven to see the affliction of people.

- ³⁴ *To crush underfoot
all the prisoners of the earth,
³⁵ to deny a man justice
in the presence of the Most High,
³⁶ to subvert a man in his lawsuit,
the Lord does not approve.*
- ³⁷ *Who has spoken and it came to pass,
unless the Lord has commanded it?*

³⁸ *Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that good and bad come?*

³⁹ *Why should a living man complain,
a man, about the punishment of his sins?*

⁴⁰ *Let us test and examine our ways,
and return to the LORD!*

⁴¹ *Let us lift up our hearts and hands
to God in heaven:*

⁴² *“We have transgressed and rebelled,
and you have not forgiven.*

⁴³ *“You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us,
killing without pity;*

⁴⁴ *you have wrapped yourself with a cloud
so that no prayer can pass through.*

⁴⁵ *You have made us scum and garbage
among the peoples.*

⁴⁶ *“All our enemies
open their mouths against us;*

⁴⁷ *panic and pitfall have come upon us,
devastation and destruction;*

⁴⁸ *my eyes flow with rivers of tears
because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.*

⁴⁹ *“My eyes will flow without ceasing,
without respite,*

⁵⁰ *until the LORD from heaven
looks down and sees;*

⁵¹ *my eyes cause me grief
at the fate of all the daughters of my city.*

Enjoy this, this the only time that Lamentations shows up in the pericope. The book of Lamentations is attributed to Jeremiah, the weeping prophet of the final days of Judah. They are prayers spoken to God by Jeremiah and the people who have felt “let down” by God as a great tragedy has overtaken them, but as public prayers they have become God’s word to us. How we read them will be important for our understanding. Are we invited to pray them along with Jeremiah? Are they warnings to us? Just how do we read this? This is a similar problem to the psalms which are also the prayers and songs of David and others.

This reading is one of the more commonly read passages from Jeremiah’s otherwise much neglected little book. There is even a popular song entitled “Great is Thy Faithfulness” which

draws on the first verses of this reading. A passage from Lamentations shows up in the Good Friday liturgy as well.

Is this text an occasion for a preacher to proclaim a theology of grief? Our world has little room for grief. We have no ritualized or formalized grief. Perhaps a funeral can still do that for some communities, but here in the northwest we are subjected to “celebrations of life!” instead of funerals. Do we need more lamentation bands instead of just praise bands? Do we need to proclaim that it is OK to grieve? Jeremiah thinks that God has it in for him. He sees that God has sent the Babylonians and has destroyed their city and their nation. He is on the point of thinking that this is God’s hatred of them. Are we able to find this sort of emotion in our Bible? Are we able to hear it from our own people? Or do we immediately shush them and turn the conversation to another place? The Bible has many individuals who are angry or frustrated with God’s actions. Do we make room for those emotions in our community? Grief almost always involves anger and sadness. How do we tell people that Jesus hears those prayers too? Jeremiah felt like God wasn’t listening.

How would this work for poor folks of the congregation whose pastor and fellow congregants were slaughtered in South Carolina last week? They are undoubtedly grieving deeply. How have they been able to express that? What does the Gospel speak to such hearts?

I encourage you to read carefully the verses which precede and follow this. Like the Job reading we had a last week ago, the reading challenges the idea that God is our buddy. Here Jeremiah squarely lays the affliction he feels at the feet of God. God is a bear lying in wait for him. God has made the paths crooked, God has driven an arrow into his kidneys, made him grind his teeth on gravel, and torn him to pieces. Jeremiah’s pleas for help have not been answered; Jeremiah has been cast into darkness and despair.

The only respite Jeremiah has is the promise of God, something to which he clings blindly and with the clutch of a very desperate man. The promise is our text for the day. The general gist of this is that the person who is feeling cut off from God should patiently wait. God does not leave us without hope. There is hope. The Lord does not cast off forever. Yes, he causes us grief, but he also has compassion on us, and deals with us according to his steadfast love.

Notice too that verses 28-30 really sound like Jesus in his suffering and death. He is filled with insults, he gives his cheek to his tormenters, he is silent and puts his mouth in the dust (I thirst!). God’s answer to our suffering is always Christ.

The preacher interested in using this passage will want to read the rest of this book. Jeremiah is pretty upset with God in spots. He wonders how such a thing could have happened, he doubts God, and he wonders if God still loves him at all. He wonders if he loves God. This is a book which plumbs the depths of human emotions. A surface reading of this will not get what he is saying at all and will lead to the superficial sermon which often makes too light of human suffering. “You’ll get over it.” is not what Jeremiah means at all. He is speaking to and for

people who are undergoing a serious crisis of faith. He does not take that lightly, but offers them realistic hope. Yes, this situation really stinks, but it is not the whole story.

The last verse raises some interesting questions for us. God does not afflict us from the heart. He does not afflict us to destroy us or because he hates us. His love for us is steadfast and sure, even when we cannot see it so well. He may be educating us and that might be very unpleasant. There may be consequences and parts of God's plans which I cannot see very well, but He has revealed to us that He loves us. If I am suffering, I know that God does not hate me.

For the Christian who is asking questions about God, however, this raises some very interesting questions. If God is really God, and therefore has all the power, how is it that he is doing things that he does not want to do? Power gets what it wants or it fails, it has run into a greater power. Here God afflicts us unwillingly. God is hurting me, but he doesn't want to do it, what compels him to such an act? There is only one attribute of God which makes sense of this, Love. God's power is subject to his love. His love drives him to do things that he does not want to do. Because I am in Christ, the affliction I may suffer at his hand I can believe is always pedagogical and reforming. The affliction which his only begotten suffered, when he gave his cheek to the one who strikes and when his mouth was in the dust of Golgatha, that was punitive/retributive, that was justice being done. He does not afflict me from his heart.

How shall we say that to our skeptic neighbors? There is a difficulty in facing the person who is facing deep grief and telling them to look to the unjust death of Jesus two thousand years ago. How does that make it better? God suffered too. Does that really help? I think we can say that it does help, but if we are going to love the folks who don't get it, we have to see this too. God's ways are mysterious and they don't make sense and pretending that they do make sense is not going to be productive at all.

Too often we tell people how they should feel. The context however really smashes that idea that Christians always feel good. I don't know about you, but I loathe the idea that all songs in church should be happy songs. Jeremiah clearly does not feel good here. I think of someone who has lost a child. If I just tell them to buck up, what I am really telling them is that they are feeling the wrong thing. Truthfully, however, Jeremiah was wondering where God is. He felt alone. He felt terror. He saw no way out. But he still had hope. Feeling like you are getting stomped on, feeling anger and loneliness, feeling like God is not on your side does not mean you have no hope. Jeremiah still had hope. We tend to think that some emotions are so antithetical to faith that the person who feels these things cannot believe. But that simply is not so. Such feelings may not be healthy for a whole life, but they are part of the human experience. Jesus died for folks who feel this way too.

Psalm 30

I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up
and have not let my foes rejoice over me.

² O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.

³ O LORD, you have brought up my soul from Sheol;
you restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit.

⁴ Sing praises to the LORD, O you his saints,
and give thanks to his holy name.

⁵ For his anger is but for a moment,
and his favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may tarry for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

⁶ As for me, I said in my prosperity,
“I shall never be moved.”

⁷ By your favor, O LORD,
you made my mountain stand strong;
you hid your face;
I was dismayed.

⁸ To you, O LORD, I cry,
and to the Lord I plead for mercy:

⁹ “What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?”

¹⁰ Hear, O LORD, and be merciful to me!
O LORD, be my helper!”

¹¹ You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;
you have loosed my sackcloth
and clothed me with gladness,

¹² that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever!

This Psalm is juxtaposed to Jeremiah deliberately. It is the other side of the coin. This is the song of the person who is on the other side of the problem, who looks back upon it with wholly changed eyes. He is not grimly holding onto the promise but rejoicing in its fulfillment.

At the same time, just as Jeremiah based his hope on the promise of God’s love, the preacher of this psalm also needs to remember that whether things are going well or not so well, we cannot base the love of God on what we are experiencing. God loves people who are going through the wringer of life, and God loves those who are on top of the world. We cannot deny the love to the other person.

II Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-15

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵ and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. ⁶ Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. ⁷ But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.

⁸ I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. ¹⁰ *And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it.* ¹¹ *So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have.* ¹² *For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.* ¹³ For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴ your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. ¹⁵ As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”

After the jubilant first part of II Corinthians one notices a little change here at Chapter 8. This has led some folks to wonder if this is actually part of the original letter or if it is not an insertion from another letter of Paul which was simply appended to the end of the earlier material. Then they see another letter beginning in chapter 10. All this gets rather silly after a while. I read one gal who was pretty sure that she saw at least 8 letters in this second missive to the Corinthians. I must say I was not impressed.

It is beyond dispute that Paul is changing subjects here, but that does not mean that this is a different letter. In the first part of the letter Paul rejoices that the relationship with the congregation which seemed to be severed after they rejected his earlier pleas and letters, has been restored. They have asked for forgiveness and Paul joyfully gives it. That is really what the first part of II Corinthians is about, as Paul explains that whole process. Starting in chapter 8, Paul now turns his attention to the whole reason for his third missionary journey. He writes about the offering for the starving Christians in Jerusalem.

It seems that the happy little commune described in the first chapters of Acts in which the believers in Jerusalem sold their property and lived communally was not working out very well. It is important to remember that the book of Acts records what did happen, not necessarily what God wanted to happen. The disciples in Jerusalem are starving and they appear to be without

resources. Paul, eager to build bridges with the Jewish Christian community and to serve his Master Jesus, volunteers/is sent on a mission to the congregations he started in the Aegean basin and Asia Minor. He is to collect an offering which is to relieve the suffering of the desperate Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul is no fool about this. Acts records that he set up a home base in Ephesus and conducts a multi-year campaign. He does not just take money back to Jerusalem, but also young men. Probably this is because the money was in coin and it was simply too heavy for Paul to carry, but also so that they could report back to their congregations that the money had been properly delivered to the needy folk of Jerusalem. Paul also may have seen this as an opportunity to train new leaders for the Church by bringing them back to the center of the Christian movement at the time.

Early in the journey in the spring of the year Paul got some word that things were not good in Corinth. He writes a letter addressing some concerns, but that letter is lost to us. He references it in the book we call first Corinthians. In Ephesus (probably) he is met by people from Cloe's house who also bring a verbal report and questions. It is in response to this group and letter that Paul writes a second letter to the Corinthians which we call I Corinthians. There is a painful visit, in which it appears Paul is badly treated, and there is a harsh letter which is lost to us. Finally the folks in Corinth relent, repent, and that occasions this third letter. But all the while Paul has been visiting his old congregations in Philippi, Troas, Thessalonica, Berea, and elsewhere, raising funds, seeking volunteers to help carry the funds, and amassing quite a bit of money to bring to the relief of the Jerusalem Christians.

With forgiveness spoken, Paul finally feels that he can make the appeal to the Corinthians to be a part of this ministry of giving. I have often used this as a part of a stewardship emphasis in my congregations. As it appears in this season, the preacher might just want to take the opportunity to addressing giving outside the course of the stewardship campaign and talk more about the nature of the giver and the giving heart, regardless of the gift given.

Notice a couple of things here in these verses from Paul. First he compares them to the Macedonian Christians. He is aware of the generosity of other Christians and uses it to urge them to generosity, even to spur them to generosity. They are not wealthy in northern Greece, in fact, it was long a poor part of the Roman Empire relatively speaking. But they gave out of their poverty beyond their means. The Corinthians probably include at least a few folks of means. We know that Cloe's household is described as a home of some substance, at least it had servants who could be dispatched to Paul. There appear to have been multiple congregations in the city as well, Phoebe comes from a group that meets in a suburb called Chencrya (see Romans 15). Paul is comparing them to other generous Christians and expecting them to measure up. Paul is bold here, he is also a keen observer of human beings. He is not shy about talking about money. He is willing to say that someone gave and that you can too. There is none of this sense that money is a taboo subject for the religious person.

Secondly, notice in the second paragraph that he is careful not to make this a command, but to tie it to the love of Christ. The gift is a demonstration of something internal, but it is not the thing itself. Just as the sneeze is a demonstration of the inner sickness, not the sickness itself. The gift is a demonstration of a love which resides in the heart, a love which God put there in Christ.

I am not sure why the verses were excluded from this reading. I think it simply reads better with them. Perhaps they were concerned about the length of the Gospel reading.

The last point I would have you notice about Paul's appeal is that he focuses on the practical benefits. Helping out another in their day of need creates a whole community of people that can help us out on our day of need. The early Christians were noted for loving one another. It appears that they practiced a radical sort of hospitality. They never went to the first century version of Motel 6 or Super 8, they looked up the local Christians and stayed there. They were a communal form of health insurance, caring for one another when they got sick. They were a burial society, relieving widows of the need to pay for funerals for their spouses. They assumed debts on each other's behalf and helped each other out. Paul is taking that localized reality and making it a church wide reality. This is about as close as Paul gets to speaking of the Christian Church as an entity larger than the local congregation or cluster of congregations in a city.

As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack."

Does this last verse give us an occasion to question the underlying capitalism of our culture? This can be a dicey proposition because many in our culture would like to say that our Christian culture and capitalism are roughly synonymous. We are quick to blame the poor for their own poverty. Paul seems to see a community which does not have needy people in it. Can we envision that? What would that look like?

Mark 5:21-43

²¹ And when Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered about him, and he was beside the sea. ²² Then came one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name, and seeing him, he fell at his feet ²³ and implored him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live."

²⁴ And he went with him.

And a great crowd followed him and thronged about him. ²⁵ And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, ²⁶ and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. ²⁷ She had heard the reports about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. ²⁸ For she said, "If I touch even his garments, I will be made well." ²⁹ And immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰ And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone out from him, immediately turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my garments?" ³¹ And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing

around you, and yet you say, ‘Who touched me?’”³² And he looked around to see who had done it.³³ But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him and told him the whole truth.³⁴ And he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

³⁵ While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler's house some who said, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?”³⁶ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.”³⁷ And he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James.³⁸ They came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and Jesus saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.³⁹ And when he had entered, he said to them, “Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping.”⁴⁰ And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was.⁴¹ Taking her by the hand he said to her, “Talitha cumi,” which means, “Little girl, I say to you, arise.”⁴² And immediately the girl got up and began walking (for she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement.⁴³ And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

A couple of things to note right off the bat about this pericope:

- 1. We notice that these events all transpire in the midst of large crowds. Jesus is in the middle of a whole bunch of people, but he pays attention to individuals. There is a sweet Gospel message in that alone. I am one of seven billion people on the earth – but He sees me. He looks for the woman in the middle of the text, offering the same peace he commanded to the wind and waves last week. This is Jesus looking to me, just to me, remember he is way beyond three dimensional in this. He is the creator of time and space, thus he can create a moment in which he is listening just to me. He is not sorting my prayers out of two billion other prayers spoken today. He has taken this moment of my need and he has listened to me, seen my tears, loved me, and put his arm around me.*
- 2. “The child is not dead but sleeping.” They were not dumb about death in the first century. She was dead by any scientific measure, but what we see as the end and the final breath, is but a sleep to him. The Bible has a different definition of death than we do. It sees death as something spiritual, relational to God, not as the reductive materialist sees it. When we stop breathing is not really death in the Biblical sense. Jesus came to raise the dead. Worried parents might ask today, will he take her hand and raise up my sick daughter from a hospital bed? I don't know if will happen today, but there is a day when he will call her name, by name, and she will open her eyes to heaven's glory and eternal life and no matter what she died of, she will breathe again. This thing we call death is really not death to him.*

This passage is what many commentators have called a rhetorical sandwich or intercalation. Mark has started one story, then switched to another story, before he finished the first story. You

can think of one story wrapping around the other story like the bread of a sandwich. Matthew and Luke will tell this same episode in the same way. The message is clear, but we are not used to seeing texts this way so we don't often pick up on the significance. The synagogue ruler, Jairus in another Gospel account, was a religious man; he was roughly equivalent to the congregational president or the pastor. The synagogue was the religious center for those communities and this was an important man. He sat in front in church.

The woman, on the other hand, was rendered ceremonially unclean by a menstrual cycle that would not end. For twelve years she suffered with this. The health care system has not helped her, she has lost much and suffered much from the physicians and still she suffered. She could not attend the synagogue or temple. The culture of the day treated her as an outcast for this condition. She was supposed to maintain a distance from other people until this ended, and for twelve years it did not end.

You have a classic "insider/outsider" dichotomy brewing here. Jairus needs Jesus and the woman needs Jesus and they both get Jesus. The person who is sitting in the front row of Church and the person who thinks she is unworthy to go to Church both need the same thing, and both receive the same thing. It doesn't matter if you are a pastor or a prostitute, you still need Jesus to die for you, you still need his forgiveness, and you both get it.

This is the genius of Christianity. The disciples and Apostles who write the Bible never set themselves up as the next Jesus, they are all in line with us, beggars for the mercy of God through His Son. This is actually rather unusual in religious circles. Most often the successors of the religion's founder seek to continue his ministry by assuming his role. Just look at how Brigham Young assumed the role of the prophet after Joseph's Smith's death. The disciples of Jesus do this differently, and the books they pen which tell the Jesus story, the Gospels, regularly portray them as needy sinners.

Here we get the idea that people who are in church every Sunday and those who are not, as this woman was excluded, both need and receive the same salvation from God. Jairus' daughter is dying and then dead. As a synagogue ruler he may have run a considerable risk bringing this itinerant and sometimes suspect preacher/miracle worker under his roof. But the desperate love of a father for his daughter shattered that reticence.

The woman was not supposed to touch a man and yet she reached out to grab the edge of Jesus' robe, believing that if she would just touch it, she would be healed, and she was, and she knew it immediately. Jesus whirls around and looks over the crowd wondering who touched him. As Christians who confess his deity, we have to wonder why he needed to ask, but really we should not. He asks for the same reason that God called out for Adam and Eve in the garden after they fell into sin. He was much more interested in her response to the question than learning information. He already knew the information; he wanted her confession of faith, most of all he wanted to call her daughter. So he asks who touched him. This touching is interesting. Usually when something unclean, as the woman was unclean, touches something clean, the clean thing is

soiled by the unclean thing. But this is the opposite. Jesus' cleanness comes to the woman. The same applies to the dead body of the little girl. It too was an unclean thing. But it does not render Jesus unclean when he touches it. He takes away the uncleanness. Do we preach Jesus the celestial washcloth today? Jesus the soap of the universe?

The disciples are scratching their heads because the crowds are so thick and people are constantly touching Jesus, but the woman knows he is looking for her. In fear and trembling, a woman who firmly believes that she is not worthy, she kneels before him and tells the whole truth. You can almost see the smile on Jesus' face as he calls her daughter, commends her faith and sends her home whole and well.

Meanwhile, as he has discoursed with this unclean woman, the little girl has died. Jairus is counseled not to trouble the teacher any more. You are off the hook, Jairus, you can forget about the whole thing; don't run the risk of bringing this dangerous man under your roof. Had Jesus delayed for this very reason? Did he want to bring this synagogue ruler to the same moment of crisis that that the woman who knelt before him afraid had been in? Remember what Jeremiah wrote above – God does not afflict us from his heart.

Jesus tells him not to be afraid, but to believe. And together they proceed. The gathered mourners, probably professionals who did this for a living, laugh when Jesus proclaims her only sleeping. Jesus kicks them out and takes the parents and his inner circle of disciples up to the room where the corpse is laid out. He takes her by the hand and says "Little girl, get up." And she opens her eyes and sits up and starts walking around, sick no longer. She was about twelve years old. They are amazed, who wouldn't be! Jesus tells them not to tell anyone about this, and then, in one of the most endearing little lines in the Gospels, he tells them to give her something to eat. When a Jewish mother needs to be told to feed her children, you know that she is out of her mind, in this case she is out of her mind with joy and amazement. You get the impression that Jairus and his wife are so overjoyed they have forgotten how to be parents for a little while and Jesus has to call them back to earth. She's hungry. This might also be a little like Jesus' own resurrection accounts in which he eats. It is a proof that this is no ghost.

In terms of our recurrent fear theme, notice how it shows up again in both of these accounts. The woman is afraid and trembles before Jesus. Jesus tells Jairus not to be afraid, even when they will laugh at him and he may suffer all sorts of repercussions of having this Jesus come to his house. Don't be afraid. Notice how the love of Jesus, expressed to desperate people overcomes the fear.

What is up with the 12 years in this text? The woman has the disease for 12 years and the child is 12 years old? Why is this important? Is it just another way for Mark to compare the two, to put them into parallel? Is this because 12 is the number of the church? Or is this just an accident of what actually happened? Is this Mark symbolically talking about the Church? Jairus' daughter had 12 years of life, the woman had 12 years of a sort of death with this disease, but both of them need and get the same Jesus. The people inside the church, and the people outside the church,

they all get Jesus. We like to limit that, but he doesn't. Do we ever think that we are wasting time on folks who are not paying the bills? Do we ever get in trouble for neglecting the flock to attend to the lost? Jairus probably thinks he is important, probably more important than this unclean, non-synagogue attending woman. She has three pretty important strikes against her. Does Jesus delay to show him a lesson too?

Jairus and the woman are both desperate. They both are at their wits end. Jesus brings Jairus there by delay. The woman was already there.

Again, we are reminded that too often we have told people how to feel. Despair, great stress, feeling like the world is collapsing around us, this is not unheard of for God's people. God reached out in love toward both Jairus and the woman and in Jeremiah's despair.

Law

1. Death and sickness, poverty and persecution, suffering of every kind surround and encircle me. They make me fearful and weak. I cannot overcome them and know that eventually they will overcome me. I have real problems.
2. I need help, but I am afraid there too. God should not help the likes of me. I am unclean, I am not worthy. I have thought, said, and done things which no one can be proud of, which God must loathe. I deserve what I am getting, yes, even my death. I deserve that.
3. Even when I do things right, I don't really do them right. I throw a check in the offering plate, but can I ever say that my motives are pure? Sing a hymn, does not my voice crack a little. Say the Lord's Prayer, can I ever do that without my mind wandering at least once? What is wrong with me? More importantly, how do I fix that? I can't.
4. The vicious economy of justice, the language of retribution finds easy purchase in my life. I understand it, I like it. It makes sense to me. Bad things which happen to me must be what I have coming to me, therefore it is hopeless to seek out help. God would only be thwarting justice if he helped me out of my predicament.
5. This causes me to see my neighbor and my family through lens of scale balancing. It is a world in which sin must be atoned for, preferably by a pound of your flesh, by taking it out of your hide. I know my debt to God, so I am bound and determined to live a life of meticulous scale balancing with my neighbor
6. And so I suffer these things, quietly despairing. I reach out my hand to grasp a passing robe, my own fears laugh at me when I turn to God. He won't help. Death is all I can expect from the righteous One's hands.

Gospel

1. Jesus knows your trials and your tribulations. He knows hunger, cold, and want. He has been surrounded by men who encircle him to kill him. He knows pain. He knows suffering. He knows what it is to die. You are not alone in these things.
2. What is more, he not only suffers with you but he does something tangible about it. He did not have to die that death, but he did. He did for you. He knew every sinful thought you ever have had, he knew every deed, every word, and he did not turn from that cross. Yes, you deserve death, but that is not what he gave.
3. He knows you are powerless to fix this situation. He knows that you cannot overcome your fears alone or change your heart. He knows that you will not be able to create some pure love, so he gives it to you. He accepts the offerings you make, and the songs you sing. He blends your gifts with Christians around the world, and your songs become melded with angelic choirs.
4. And so he breaks the cycle of retribution which is all we otherwise would know. He brings graciousness to our lives, not only vertically as we relate to God, but also horizontally, as we relate to one another. I don't have to treat another as he or she deserves because I have not been treated so. God has already forgiven them, can I really do any less?
5. Thus, I can put out my hand and receive a piece of bread as that woman put out her hand and touched his robe. I can bring my deepest fears, my greatest problems to this Jesus, and he smiles upon me, says, "don't be afraid" and he walks up to that upper room with me to behold my greatest fear, my daughter, myself, my death, and he says "little girl/little boy, get up."

Sermon Ideas

1. "Even me – Even You – Even Them" (That the hearer would delight in the love which God has for them despite their sin, and translate that delight into a fresh and genuine love for the sinners in their own lives.)

That little word "even" makes for an interesting pun today. We talk about being "even" when the score is tied or settled. If I have done a favor to my neighbor, he feels indebted perhaps until he has done a good turn by me. But there is another way to use that word. When you put a question mark after the "even me?" it becomes a totally different thing. Will you give the gift, "even to me?" This sermon will seek to transition from the first to the second usage of that word, so that the sinner will delight that the favor of God is not a matter of being "even" but is really a matter of a gift given "even to me." Luther would have called this "despite" theology, as opposed to "ergo" theology. Despite theology was God for me despite me. Ergo theology was God for me because (ergo) of something I had done. This is grace time. Yes, God does know what you have said, thought, and done. He knows it better than you know it. He knows that you are afraid that your sins are too big

for his forgiveness, or that you have come back to this place and asked for his help and his forgiveness for the same little sin every Sunday of your life. He knows that you are afraid of that. He knows all the things that you are afraid of, and he has loved you anyway, giving you his only Son.

But this is not a gift given to put away in your heart and never to see the light of day. Today we see two different, very different people receiving the same gift, needing the same gift. You see, people who go to church every day and those who never go are not that different. They both need this same Jesus and they both are given this same Jesus. This graciousness of God even to me, means that I see you differently now too. The Jairus and the woman are in the same boat, both are loved, both are needy. I cannot see my neighbor, whether he goes to church or not, the same way ever again. Jesus has died for him too, whether he knows it or not. The graciousness of God which is shown even to me is even to you, and even to them.

A pair of possible illustrations:

- a. “Pay it Forward” Movie is about giving someone love before they have a chance to love you. powerful idea.
 - b. “Seven Pounds” a film about someone who after a car accident could not live the guilt. He determines he is not worthy of living, so he donates all his organs while he is still alive. It is an interesting exploration of scale balancing. We feel that we need to give a pound of flesh to balance things out with Christ. My suffering has been removed from the economy of righteousness before God. It may be God helping me, it may be an opportunity for God to help someone else through me, it may be something else, but it is never God punishing me, that happened a long time ago on a cross and it is finished.
2. Love enough (OT and Gospel - That the hearer would believe that God’s great love is enough in Christ for any crisis, for any problem they may face.)

This sermon is for the discouraged in the congregation. The hearer is the person who wonders if God can love them or if they have a problem which has no solution, a cancer the doctor has said is incurable, a divorce which has no end in sight to the pain, a child who has descended into the depths of addiction, etc.

The children of Israel had a serious problem. They thought that the covenant which God had made with them had been shattered by their own sinfulness. The woman in the Gospel lesson had a problem, her disease could not be healed by any doctor. Jairus had a problem, his beloved daughter, the delight of his eyes and heart, lay dying and dead in his house. Big problems need big solutions. God is the God of big solutions. The children of Israel came home, the covenant was kept, God was gracious to them. The woman touched the edge of Jesus robe, and was healed. Jesus took the little girl by the hand and she was raised. Jesus is aware of your fears and your problems today. He knows how

great they are. And he has done something about them, and continues to do things about them. He died because they world was seriously messed up. it was the solution for the whole universe. But he also knows your problems, your suffering, your hurt. He hears your prayers, gives you his undivided attention. I don't exactly know what that will mean for his solution, but I know, it means he will do something marvelous. It may be at the end of time, it may be today. But I know he will do something and it will be wonderful to behold. God's love will prevail

3. Jesus looks me in the eye. (That the hearer would believe and be comforted that Jesus turns to them, perceives their hurt and fear, and pledges his cross and his love to them right now.)

This sermon was originally intended for a congregation with a sick a child within its circle of loved ones – the grand-daughter of members who lay terribly sick in a hospital. Are we afraid that God won't answer us? Jeremiah was afraid of that or at least it felt like to him.

We notice that these events all transpire in the midst of large crowds. Jesus is in the middle of a whole bunch of people, but he pays attention to individuals. He looks for the woman, offering the same peace he commanded to the wind and waves last week. This is Jesus looking to me, just to me, remember he is way beyond three dimensional in this. He is the creator of time and space, thus he can create a moment in which he is listening just to me. He is not sorting my prayers out of two billion other prayers spoken today. He has taken this moment of my need and he has listened to me, seen my tears, loved me, and put his arm around me. "The child is not dead but sleeping." They were not dumb about death in the first century. She was dead by any scientific measure, but what we see as the end and the final breath, is but a sleep to him. He came to raise the dead. Will he take her hand and raise up my sick daughter from a hospital bed? I don't know if will happen today, but there is a day when he will call her name, by name, and she will open her eyes to heaven's glory and eternal life and no matter what she died of, she will live again.

The woman who touched his robe tried to get lost in that crowd. Jesus did not let her be simply a faceless petitioner who was not worthy to address him. Jairus hears the voices of advice that whisper in his ear that it is too late; there is nothing that can be done. Jesus hears those words too, he overhears those words, and he acts on them. He looks Jairus in the eye and urges him not to fear, but to believe. And then he takes him by the hand and dismisses the mourners and the wailers, and talks to the cooling corpse of his daughter. "Little girl, get up!" the voice that brought peace to the wind and waves, drove death away today, replaced the fear and grief of her parents with the ecstatic joy that forgot to feed her.

I can promise no miracle today. They always belong to God and they are always part of his great plans and happen on his schedule. But I can promise a miracle. He is not

insensitive to our fear or our pain, but has sent his Son into this flesh to take it all to himself. And because Jesus was the precious little boy of parents, because Jesus saw and acted on the grief and fear of Jairus and this woman, because Jesus was driven to a cross to die for all this world's ills, and because Jesus conquered that death once and for all, I know that there will be a miracle, a miracle designed just for her.

4. He does not afflict us from the heart (OT: That the hearer who is suffering or who will suffer, would believe that God never afflicts us out of hatred for us, and therefore the suffering human being has hope.)

This sermon addresses the suffering of the Christian and the whole world. It also would address the current zeitgeist which suggests that God is either evil or powerless to help us. It is important for the preacher to remember that the Christian will often wonder if God can love me (see the first sermon) but the person outside the faith will wonder if there is a God. They look at the great evil of the world and can only imagine an evil God.

The preacher will want to back up and reveal for the congregation the depth of Jeremiah's suffering and the extent to which he feels that God has abandoned him and is ignoring him. He feels that God has shot him in the back, hurt him, is a lion ready to devour him. But he still has hope because God has promised him.

Too often we get the idea that real Christians always are happy, perky people. But it is not so. Christians have the same gamut of emotions as anyone else. We will want to validate that for people, give them permission of a sorts to have these feelings. In fact, Jesus will address these feelings. It is OK to feel like you have a big sign on your back telling God "Kick me." It is alright to wonder if God has targeted me. Those questions are not the sign of no faith. Jeremiah and many of his fellow authors of Psalms and other books of the bible asked very difficult questions of God. (Psalm 13:1-6 and 34, etc.)

This sermon will also want to notice how much verses 28-30 look like Jesus. God's answer to our suffering was not to take our suffering away right now but to join us in suffering, to take it to himself.

But the Gospel here is that even though we may feel like the world, God, everyone hates us, Jeremiah says that God never afflicts us from his heart. He never allows or brings sorrow to us because he hates us or wants to destroy us. It may feel that way, but it is never that way. No matter how bad it gets, it is never so bad because God has stopped loving you.

5. Watching Generous Jesus (Epistle – that the hearer would excel in the generosity which Jesus has already shown them.)

Being a preacher is an amazing thing. You get to watch Jesus at work from an amazing vantage point. The preacher today wants to encourage and proclaim the gift of generosity, but that can easily devolve into law. He needs to be aware that our ears are quick to hear

any speech about money as law speech. This sermon will start with the gracious Jesus words in the Epistle (see verse 1 and 9).

But that generous Jesus takes shape in the lives of people.

- a. Fairness – God calls us to community in which we help one another. Paul is calling us to see our generosity in that context. Someday it may be us.

Illustration: <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/g/generosity.htm>

- b. It is a witness – Paul holds up the generosity of the Macedonians. People see this generous Jesus in our giving. He uses that to build his kingdom. It is a good thing.
- c. Paul ties into the passion of the Corinthians. They excel. Paul challenges them to see that in their giving too. We can be proud of watching Jesus at work in our lives. The Corinthians are not told to be ashamed of their giving but to tie it to their passionate love for Christ.