

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – July 15 (Proper 10)

In the LCMS we like to talk about inspiration. Of course, when we do that we nearly always are talking about the fact that God has inspired Scripture. True enough and we do well to remember it. But when people start talking about being “inspired” suddenly we can get a little nervous. We may have the ghost of Luther whispering about “Schwermer” in our ears. We become suspicious that our interlocutor may have swallowed the Holy Spirit, feathers and all. Does he or she claim to have some special access to God, some knowledge which is not in the Scripture? In the years which followed Luther’s initial attempts at Reformation, it quickly became clear that “Sola Scriptura” was not an avenue to Christian unity. Zwingli, Luther, Calvin, and Muntzer all asserted very different visions of what it meant to be a Christian and each one claimed “Sola Scriptura!” There were many voices who sought after a Christian unity which flowed out of an obedience to the Holy Spirit. The Zwickau prophets which incurred Luther’s wrath were but the beginning, and we continue to see it today. Whether we are talking about a full-bore Pentecostalism of the Assembly of God or the much more modest claims of the Vineyard Fellowship, the Reformation gave birth to multiple movements which sought authoritative answers to divisive issues in “the Holy Spirit.”

If we hear the word in every day conversation and come to understand that our friend has been inspired by another person and not claiming some direct revelation from God, then the specter of the enlightenment steps in and we start to look for the feet of clay. Every hero has a pair of those. Martin Luther King plagiarized his dissertation, FDR died in the arms of his mistress, Thomas Jefferson fathered a child by at least one of his slaves, etc., etc. Heroes are hard to come by these days and the glut of information in which we live does not make them any easier to keep. They are easy to find, but as soon as they get the name hero there is a whole industry dedicated to finding the reason we should reject them.

But all this is neither good Lutheranism nor is it even a good way to understand the way that people work. We need inspiration. A powerful story, a heroic deed, a noble sacrifice are the stuff of inspiration. Luther loved the saints, and he felt that God indeed used their stories to inspire people to similar acts of love and service in this world. Their sins and foibles were heard as further proof that God used sinful people to do his saintly work. Through them, God was shaping his people. Lutherans who define their differences with Roman Catholics on the basis of “saint worship” would do well to remember that Luther referred to Mary as the Blessed Virgin for his entire life. Yes, he railed against the abuses of the “papists” in his day who elevated veneration of the saints above Christ, but we might be guilty of falling off the horse on the other side in our rejection of saints.

Perhaps we need to redefine saint for ourselves. We tend to see saints as people who are holy, but that is a mistake if we think they are holy because they intrinsically owned holiness. They are holy because God has made them holy, just as he makes us holy. That is not their work, but God’s work and holding up a saint for veneration is another way to attribute to God the Holy Spirit his proper work.

But we might want to dig a little deeper yet. Are saints saintly because they inspire other people to do good things? What makes a person a saint? Is it their perfection or is it the fact that God used this broken person to work his Kingdom's work in this place?

The Enlightenment's desire to ruin all my heroes and create a cynic of me is simply misguided. Of course these heroes are fallible people. Does MLK's plagiarism make his work as a leader in the civil rights movement any less remarkable? Does FDR's infidelity render his Great Depression and war time leadership any less inspiring? Is the Declaration of Independence somehow invalidated because the author abused one of the slaves he shamefully owned? And yet, if I look up to someone, I am disappointed when I hear of their foibles and there is a whole segment of the chattering classes who cackle when they find something wrong with a man or woman whom some consider inspirational.

Of course a Christian might say that this is all has another goal. The Enlightenment endeavor to make a cynic of me really has another aim than simply disabusing me of human and divine heroes. There is another hero who has no feet of clay, but who is to be scrutinized with a jaundiced eye. If we cannot find the moral turpitude we will contrive it. Of course this hero is God, and so we will find him guilty of arbitrary use of power, of cruelty when he sent in the Israelites against the poor Canaanites, of racial favoritism in his treatment of the Jews. Even fiction gets into the act as Dan Brown wants us to suspect that Jesus had a lover and wife. If this effort fails the attack moves onto the credibility of the story itself. Surely it is but one step removed from some sort of religious propaganda. If you really knew him, you would not be able to believe in him. Or perhaps even more effectively, if you had known the real Jesus, the Palestinian peasant, you would never believe that contrived and concocted Jesus whom the institutional Church talks about. That sounds like something my enemy would really like me to believe. And we are back to the discussion of inspiration we cited at the beginning of this essay.

This question of heroes is important. The hyper-suspicion of modernity to anything which smacks of the divine often causes us to hear of God's work with a sort of blinder on. We read the Bible and hear the Gospel mindful of or even fearful of the sneering judgment of those who start out believing that God does not even exist. Assuming the posture of such suspicion offers us the hope that we will be more acceptable in the laboratory and to the humanist crowd, but does it stultify faith and our ability to be people of faith? What is more, the offered acceptability is a farce. The reductive materialist will not ever accept faith as something real.

The modern Christian is in a bit of a bind. If he believes the stories he is excluded from polite society. If he doesn't he is hardly a Christian anymore. So he fakes it in polite society, burying his faith in the babble of this age. But that is not without an effect. We become the people whom we effect. Refuse to confess your faith often enough for the sake of social acceptability, job security, or just social convention and it becomes more true than lie. Is the naiveté of a child who avidly reads his comic books something we have lost? Do we regret that?

How do we preach the saints today? How do we let them inspire us? It would seem that Lutherans have a unique insight into this. *Simul justus et peccator* should give us the ability to

see that God has always used flawed and broken people, and just because someone is flawed does not mean God is not using them. Nor does it even surprise us. The only hero of Scripture is God and the only one who wears a white robe because he earned it is Jesus. Should we not also be acknowledging the flaws of saints and applying the grace and love to God to them as well?

Mother Teresa wrote a diary in which she questioned God and his call to her. Does that make her service to the poor of Calcutta less valuable? George Washington was raising pot on his estate. What does this really mean? Can we not acknowledge the foibles and be surprised that God would do good through broken people just like us?

Collect of the Day

O Lord, You granted your prophets strength to resist the temptations of the devil and courage to proclaim repentance. Give us pure hearts and minds to follow Your Son faithfully even into suffering and death; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Whom would we put forward as a modern example of someone who resisted temptation and proclaimed repentance courageously? Billy Graham? Mother Teresa? Can we think of someone in our own congregation's recent past or history? Is there an "Edna" or a "Wilbur" in your congregation who has been an inspiration to the congregation? Perhaps there is an old preacher you know or a Sunday school teacher. There is a really important thing to say that we can see a sinner, a real human being, through whom God did something really good.

God granted his prophets of old to resist temptation and to proclaim repentance. If you want a fascinating read, you really ought to pick up the life of Saint Anthony. He was the father of the monastic tradition. After the persecutions of the Roman Empire ended upon the ascension of Constantine to the throne, the Christian movement grew dramatically. Suddenly everyone wanted to be a Christian and the folks who had endured the scourge of persecution looked a little suspiciously on the man who presented himself for baptism as a believer when it suddenly became easy, even fashionable to be a Christian.

One reaction to all this was the hermitage. If the government would not offer me a chance to be persecuted, I would essentially do it to myself through self-denial and acts of extreme repentance, thereby preserving the strength and endurance of the martyrs and confessors in this soft and effete generation. Anthony's story was popularized by Athanasius and it became the staple of Christian literature up through the medieval period. In this way Athanasius founded the idea of the monastic in the Eastern part of Christianity. In the west, Anthony's model would not really take root except among the Celts in Ireland. Most of the rest of Western Europe would opt for a more military model out of simple necessity. It was too cold for the hermit to make it by himself in a cave somewhere. They needed the corporate structure which Benedict brought as he organized the monks into monasteries.

In the East, however, the solo monk, out in the desert, fasting and wrestling with Satan as they were tempted, became the picture of the truly religious person. When there was no desert

around, they would make one in the air. Simeon the Stylite lived in a relatively populous and lush area so he had a pole constructed on which he lived for upwards of thirty years. There did he wrestle with his own passions and the temptations of the evil one, and there did he become wise. The emperors and empresses of the Byzantine/Roman empire were seen climbing the ladder which led to a spot where one could shout questions up to Simeon and hear his reply if he was so inclined.

I bring this up because the people of that generation thought of these people as superstars. They were the star athletes and franchise players of their day. They were heroes because they had wrestled with Satan in the desert. For the people of the early church, these men were their champions in the fight alongside of Christ. I may be a poor Christian, but my village has a hero, a man out there on a rock somewhere who is praying and fasting and resisting, and as long as he holds out, Satan's power in this part of the world is weakened and diminished.

Who fights for us today? Do we fear Satan's power enough even to wonder? Do we have a notion that we are all capable in Christ of resisting Satan? If we do, we are deluding ourselves and evidence seems to be against us. In truth, we are not terribly good at resistance.. Satan doesn't seem to have to work too hard on us. Do we need a hero? Do we need an inspirational resister of temptation? The prayer seems to hold up the prophets of old for us. Do they still function that way? Can they or are we too cynical?

Have we given up on the ideal of purity of heart and mind? Do we actually encourage people to strive for this? Or have we so ingrained in our own theology the "sinner" of sinner and saint that we don't even try any more. Purity is not an all or nothing thing, in most experiences of purity. My OJ is 99% pure or something like that. I know a corporate pilot who won't drink it in the morning before he flies because it always contains trace amounts of alcohol. The random urine tests to which he is subjected are so sensitive he is afraid he will be tagged as drinking and flying. He is changing his behavior for the sake of a purity standard. Do we even try to get people to be more pure than they are? Do we hold out the hope that with Christ and the Holy Spirit, they might actually get more pure than they are already? Would they want to follow Jesus into suffering and death?

Readings

Amos 7:7-15 I have given us the whole chapter today. I think the lead up to this passage is really interesting. Amos is critiqued for preaching against the land when he has been praying for God's merciful forbearance and God has been relenting from punishment.

This is what the Lord GOD showed me: behold, he was forming locusts when the latter growth was just beginning to sprout, and behold, it was the latter growth after the king's mowings.

² When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said,

*“O Lord GOD, please forgive!
How can Jacob stand?
He is so small!”*

³ *The LORD relented concerning this:
“It shall not be,” said the LORD.*

⁴ *This is what the Lord GOD showed me: behold, the Lord GOD was calling for a judgment by fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land.* ⁵ *Then I said,*

*“O Lord GOD, please cease!
How can Jacob stand?
He is so small!”*

⁶ *The LORD relented concerning this:
“This also shall not be,” said the Lord GOD.*

⁷ *This is what he showed me: behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand.* ⁸ *And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said,*

*“Behold, I am setting a plumb line
in the midst of my people Israel;
I will never again pass by them;*

⁹ *the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”*

¹⁰ *Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words.”* ¹¹ *For thus Amos has said,*

*“Jeroboam shall die by the sword,
and Israel must go into exile
away from his land.”*

¹² *And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there,”* ¹³ *but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”*

¹⁴ *Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, “I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs.”* ¹⁵ *But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’* ¹⁶ *Now therefore hear the word of the LORD.*

*“You say, ‘Do not prophesy against Israel,
and do not preach against the house of Isaac.’*

¹⁷ *Therefore thus says the LORD:*

*“Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city,
and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword,
and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line;
you yourself shall die in an unclean land,
and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.”*

Amos is called from southern Judah all the way to the north to be a prophet of gloom and doom to the northern ten tribes of Israel. He asserts that God is measuring the people of God with a plumb line, a tool used to measure whether a wall is straight up and down or not. It was an ancient tool already as it had been used to construct the pyramids of Egypt. It is a cruel and merciless measure as well. One cannot make a crooked plumb line. They have no room for variance, either the wall is straight up and down or it is not. While Amos is surely talking about a crooked generation, it would have been so much better if the temple in Bethel had a wall or two that was obviously a little out of plumb.

The kings of Israel had established alternate worship sites for the children of Israel, at Dan and Bethel. The first king of the North, Jeroboam I, did this undoubtedly because he knew that the loyalty of his own people would be conflicted if they regularly journeyed to the south, to the neighboring kingdom of Judah to worship. The place of worship was always part of the patriotic realities of the people. As a result he set up these two sites on the north and south of his kingdom, but God was not pleased with this. This is the sin of Jeroboam son of Nebat, the sin of which all the kings of Israel were found guilty and therefore found to be wicked, including this king, Jeroboam II (not related to the first Jeroboam).

Amos speaks against it. God threatens never again to “pass by.” The phrase pass by is most interesting. God passed by Moses who was hidden in the cleft of the rock. It was a blessing to Moses. Jesus also is about to “pass by” the disciples in the boat when they mistake him for a ghost and are terrified. He alters course, but you get the sense from that pericope that for God to “pass by” was good thing. Likewise here. It may be the biblical idiom for the presence of God. If God is not present at these shrines, they will surely fall into neglect. Is there another way to understand this? If you find a better take on this in a commentary, let me know.

In any event the words of Amos anger the priest of that place, Amaziah. He in turn accuses Amos of sedition to the king. We don't get the answer of the king, but from what Amaziah then says to Amos we can guess the reply. Amaziah urges Amos to go home and earn his bread as a prophet among his own people. His message is not welcome in the land of Israel. Amos's answer is classic. “You think I want to be here in your miserable land? I was a farmer and a shepherd and God brought me here. I had a career, I had a job, and I did not want this one.”

The word Amos uses here is not the usual word for shepherd such as David had been before he was made a king. This is a word that evokes the picture of a sheep rancher, a man who has a considerable holding. This is the word the king of Moab used to describe himself. Amos might

not have been a simple shepherd but a significant business man, a sheep magnate of some sort. It also sounds like his holdings were diversified if he was involved in fig production. Of course, our understanding of these languages is somewhat limited, and he might have simply been a shepherd too.

What does all this mean? Lutherans have long used this as a passage which suggests that the call seeks the man and it is inappropriate for the man to seek the calling. This is why it is still somewhat frowned upon for a pastor to seek a call to specific congregation. He can tell his DP that he wants to move, he can even say that for family reasons or the like he needs to be in a particular area, but if he says he wants the call to this or that congregation, he might find doors shutting instead of opening. This is not the case in many Protestant traditions. My pastor neighbor in Portland a few years ago told me that his friend had to front a multi-thousand dollar "gift" to the local dignitary before he could get a plumb spot in a large east coast congregation. He did not think this was a problem.

Is the Lutheran take on this a case of a theology seeking a passage? In which case this might also not be terribly appropriate. At least it does not take seriously what Amos was saying or his response to the priest of Bethel. Amos is telling the people that they do not measure up. If you read the rest of the book, he is concerned that they have used their relationship with God, especially his covenantal promise to love them, as a license for them to abuse their fellow man, take advantage of the poor, the widow, and the fatherless. The very people the Torah had enjoined them to have a special care for. This is the crookedness of their lives, not just the location of their worship.

The response of Amos to the priest suggests something to us of how important God sees what we do and what just what lengths he will go in order to call us back to himself. Amos is not a local boy who has woken to his own religion, but he is a man from a distant land, perhaps a person of wealth and significance whom God has uprooted and sent to them that he might tell them what their own prophets like Elijah, Elisha, and Hosea have been unable to communicate. They have a serious God problem, they are not heeding or following the covenant, they have broken faith with God.

The situation in Amos' day bears some striking resemblance to our own. It was a time of great economic prosperity. The nation of Israel was doing well. The competing powers of Egypt and the Fertile Crescent were in decline. Like Americans, the Israelites were far wealthier than their neighbors north or south of them.

Who wants to preach Amos' message today? Who wants to hear it? Amos accused them of selling a man for a pair of sandals. I read an interesting, albeit very long, book by Brad Gregory entitled "The Unintended Reformation." In it Gregory argues that the culture which has developed in the industrial west finds its meaning in the acquisition of wealth. But this is fundamentally opposed to the message of Jesus in the Gospels. Have we, like the Israelites of Amos' day, shut our ears to the parts of our Bible that challenge the way we have structured our society? Perhaps we need to think about this in Amos' terms. If your shoes say "made in China"

what do you know about their manufacture or the man or woman who made them? Have we done the same as the people of Amos' day? Have we sold a man's life in some toxic and dismal factory in Manchuria so we can buy a pair of shoes for the same price we paid twenty years ago? Are we God's man or king commerce's man?

How might this be proclaimed today? God has mercy for people, but he also has standards. God's judgment, spoken here through Amos and today through us, is real. We don't love people when we say that their sins are not really sins. There is a strong anti-nomian streak in our culture. We sometimes want the Gospel to mean that there are no standards. The recent declaration of homosexual marriage rights is construed as a healthy expression of one's true nature. The argument suggests that we would not want to suggest that this is a sin. After all, if we bottle up these urges we will have psychological problems. But God does not send many prophets to encourage self-expression. He does send prophets to urge people to self-control. But that is profoundly unpopular today. This text could be used to articulate the idea that the Church is called to speak messages which are frequently unpopular. He called Amos to such a message. Is that our calling today? Of course our treasurer doesn't want to hear this. He is watching the offerings closely because the budget is tight. He doesn't want you to offend any of those consistent givers. The institution of the Church often struggles with this prophetic vocation. We are not always called to be calm and profitable places. Jesus last week sent his disciples out without any support.

Object lesson: a plumb line is a good visual. But the problem is that it is without mercy. The plumb line shows up our faults ruthlessly. But where is the gospel in this? I think we use a cross for the weight on the line.

Christ does not fudge the measure. The righteousness of God still obtains as the measure. But what God does is "justify" us. He makes us right, he makes us meet the measure in Christ. Christ gives us his righteousness and that is the only hope any of us have for righteousness. Both the person with the picket sign and the homosexual with the marriage license both fail to measure up to the plumb line of God. They are crooked, leaning, tottering walls. But Christ makes the crooked straight and true. He gives us his right-ness. You might also point to the modern computer version of justification. This paragraph has been given both right and left hand justification. Notice its relationship to the margin. Christ makes us "straight" and "true" with the plumb line. He justifies us.

*That is not just a lofty idea. The righteousness of Jesus is not just a nice idea, but a reality which he gives. This is what Paul is talking about in Romans and the Ephesians texts which will occupy our attention in the coming weeks. Paul expects his hearers to live out the righteousness that Christ has bestowed (Romans 6:1ff.) It does matter what we do. Our actions are indeed the expression of and the shaper of our faith. If our actions are contrary to our faith, we might just need to question the faith which we are claiming. If we don't, soon those actions will become what we believe. *Lex orandi, lex credendi**

Psalm 85:(1-7) 8-13

- LORD, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
- ² You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you covered all their sin. Selah
- ³ You withdrew all your wrath;
you turned from your hot anger.
- ⁴ Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation toward us!
- ⁵ Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?
- ⁶ Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?
- ⁷ Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,
and grant us your salvation.
- ⁸ Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;
but let them not turn back to folly.
- ⁹ Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,
that glory may dwell in our land.
- ¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.
- ¹¹ Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.
- ¹² Yes, the LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
- ¹³ Righteousness will go before him
and make his footsteps a way.

The psalm is best framed as the words of the people of Amos' day who heard and believed his prophecy. They remember the mercy of God in the past and they perceive the coming judgment and beg God once more for mercy. They vow what they will do on the day of God's merciful forbearance.

The preacher may want to pay attention to verse 10 and the beautiful imagery there. God's steadfast love (hesed) and faithfulness (zadiqa) meet. The righteousness and peace (shalom) kiss. This passage has long been a favorite for preachers to come to. It brings the holy tension of God's righteous judgment and his merciful love together and the result is peace. This passage may well have been on Paul's mind when he wrote Romans 5. God does have a holy wrath against sin. God loves the sinners. How will this reconcile? It will reconcile when the beloved Son hangs on a cross and satisfies God's righteous judgment. The Lord gave what is good.

Righteousness now goes before him and comes to us. His footsteps to grave and resurrection are our way.

This has legs to preach.

Ephesians 1:3-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

² *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

As Lutherans we are good at remembering that we are stinkers, and this text challenges us in that tendency. This text is all about what God does. My conscience often goads me and I might be listening to it, but this text barges in and only talks about God and what God has done. Like the creed, it tells us only of God's good work. There is no moral requirement here, and there is no imperative or exhortation in this. It is purely what God graciously does to us and for us. How do we preach this?

Today we begin a series of readings from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The preacher may well want to consider this a chance to get to know this little book better and along the way preach a really important series of sermons to his parishioners.

Ephesians is an interesting letter. We are pretty sure that it was not sent to the Ephesians, at least not only to the Ephesians. Our best and earliest copies don't have the name "Ephesus" in the greeting, but a blank spot. This seems to have been a circular letter, designed to be read in all the churches and the reader would insert the name of the town in which the letter was being read. Perhaps you should try that this Sunday and append the opening verses.

This little fact has led to some interesting speculation. Bart Ehrman insists that since Paul did not write any circular letters he must not have written this one. More than one person has noted that this logic is as circular as the letter.

The letter is the best written of all of Paul's letters. It is really well crafted and designed. It has many more devices of rhetoric and grammar and word choice than is Paul's usual style. Of course Ehrman points to that too as a reason to doubt its Pauline authenticity, but the differences are not that far out of the norm of what Paul wrote elsewhere. In the past several years there is an increasing willingness on the part of scholars to think that this could at least have been a letter by Paul. Because of their affinity, that means the same for the letter to Colossians which seems to have been written at the same time by the same author.

Assuming that it is really Paul's letter, Luke Johnson has posited an attractive and interesting idea for how this letter fits into the rest of the Pauline letters. Johnson thinks that this is Paul's last will and testament. It is the summary of his whole ministry and message. He writes it from prison. We think it was penned very close to the time when he wrote Colossians since the vocabulary and concepts are closely paralleled in portions of that letter. We also think that letter was penned at the same time as the letter to Philemon since they were carried by the same courier and make mention of the same people. This would most likely place them in the years of Paul's imprisonment in Rome.

Paul seems to be summarizing his idea of what this preaching has done and what it has said. As such this missive makes a great sermon series to bring the parish back to the basics of their existence as a community of Christ's followers. Paul will address the big issue which has consumed much of his time as an apostle of Christ, the relationship of Jew and Gentile. Paul will assert that the work of Christ has erased the divisions, now as human beings broken in the fall and redeemed in the cross, we stand together, united once more, before God in His grace and peace. The argument is that Jesus has made all the difference in the world, old enmities are in the past, realities that seemed so important to us before our baptisms are empty. Now my whole life is changed because Christ has come.

This first chapter plays on the idea of adoption as sons and an inheritance. This image is popular even to this day and the metaphor continues to have legs to preach. I used it frequently in Utah where the LDS claim to be natural children of God. I really stressed that we were indeed sons and daughters of God, but we were adopted, brought into that relationship by the work of Christ.

Having been adopted, however, we have an inheritance. Heaven really does already belong to us, just as a son or daughter "owns" the inheritance which will be theirs upon the death of their parents. Of course, in this case the death and resurrection of Christ has accomplished this and our own death and resurrection will be the bestowal of the final installment of this inheritance. There are points where the imagery and metaphor do break down.

Of special note is Paul's assertion that those who believed later, those who did not know Jesus or his apostles, but who have come in subsequent generations, even this generation, are just as

much part of this inheritance as the first disciples who walked the shores of Galilee with Jesus. We too have been sealed with the same Holy Spirit and made heirs of the same kingdom.

In past discussions of this text, we were attracted to the unity language of verse 10, which is the mystery of God's will revealed. God's mysterious will is that all things be united. Again we were drawn to the phrase in the psalm in which righteousness and peace kiss. God's righteousness should mean death to sin, not peace, but in Christ this comes out very differently. God's rebellious creation is not destroyed as it deserves but God crafts another ending of this. (See Athanasius' "On the Incarnation" for a much more fulsome articulation of that argument.)

Mark 6:14-29

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." ¹⁵ But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." ¹⁷ For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, ²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. ²² For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." ²³ And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." ²⁴ And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." ²⁵ And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶ And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. ²⁷ And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison ²⁸ and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Herb Hoefler, who spent his first years of ministry in India and returned there as the secretary for LCMS world mission in that part of the world, tells me that Indian Christians simply expect persecution. They never complain that God has forgotten them or that they are being unduly oppressed by God. For them, to be Christian is to be persecuted. It is a package deal.



That idea is not new with the folks in India. Indeed, if you read my comments above on the Christians in the fourth century, they were wondering if their Christianity could be authentically expressed without persecution. Some said it could not and they went into the deserts to endure a persecution of repentance and self-denial.

For Christians of North American, however, this is an alien concept. We have long heard the gospel of success which reformed Calvinism preaches. If we are faithful, God is good to us, and if God is good to us then we must be faithful. It is a painful thing for such folks to be persecuted or to suffer in any way. It means that God is no longer good to us; it is the conclusion that our faith is the reason why.

But the Gospel writers and Paul were rather explicit in this message. Persecution is indeed part and parcel of the confession of Christ. It has always been there. You need look no further than the very first human being who ever pointed to Jesus in faith, John the Baptist, who leapt in Elizabeth's womb. He did not lead a life of luxury and ease, but called to wilderness preaching he was finally arrested for preaching a politically unpopular message and cruelly beheaded because a girl could dance, her mother bore a grudge, and a king made a promise he quickly regretted. John's death is so random, so capricious. We find it disturbing and yet Mark seems to be telling his community that this is just the way of things. These were not his punishments but his calling as the forerunner of Christ. This is normal. – we might return to the plum line illustration here. God's measure of normal may not be my measure.

For the Christian who is being persecuted this actually has a profound message. Just because you are in jail does not mean that your faith has failed or that God has left you. Indeed, if we were listening, Jesus has been telling us all along that this might happen. God's prophets were arrested and killed, that did not make them less the prophets of God, nor did it invalidate their message. If you are being persecuted, it may well mean that you are authentically a Christian. It may also be a sign of God's ongoing and care and concern.

It is that last line which is hard. God's kingdom works on mechanisms which are just upside down and back ward to us. The salvation of the world is accomplished when Jesus dies on a cross. It is not glorious, it is not some light filled moment when God triumphs over the foe, but to our eyes it looks like he loses, it looks like Satan wins on that Friday called Good. It is only in faith we can look upon that cross and take comfort.

Likewise we must see the afflictions of this life and in faith take comfort in their midst. God has in the past, will in the future and may in the present be using just such things to bring about his kingdom and do his salvation work. The fear that this affliction is a punishment from God or an expression of his displeasure silences us. But the faith that sees God working in the midst of such affliction and even blessing us in such affliction opens our mouths to be the proclaiming people of God, the disciples of Jesus who to a man were persecuted, many martyred, but all were witnesses of the mighty salvation God worked in Him and works today through us.

What do I mean? I have often seen on a hospital bed that a faithful Christian has become a powerful witness to God. I have often seen in days of distress and woe that God has opened hearts and doors to the Gospel in ways we would never imagine. I have often seen that in the middle of a dark and dismal day, we might just see God do something bright and beautiful as when a heart is opened up and a new faith is born.

Mark asks us today to see tragedy in a whole different light. The death of John did not end the Jesus movement. It did not really even slow it down. Built on the death and resurrection of Jesus, our own faith cannot but expect to take up a cross and follow him, yes even to a martyr's death if that would help the kingdom, if that witness would be heeded by one impenitent person. I am, in Paul's words, an heir of eternal life. What can Herod and his headsman really do to me? Pull me to pieces and scatter them all over the earth, Jesus will find everyone and resurrect me to eternal and deathless life.

Law

1. Bad things happen to me, be they persecution or simple tragedy. They make me afraid and bitter and suspicious.
2. The sorrows I endure are often a lever for my enemy and accuser to cause me to doubt the love of God for me. How can a God who loves me let me suffer so? How can a good God do such things? Maybe he has a very good reason to do what he has done; maybe he is angry with me for my sin?
3. Such a fear of my status before God, if I believe it, serves to silence me and gives me serious heart burn, robbing me of joy.
4. Such a fear of my status before God really betrays my idolatry. I think this whole thing really does hang on me and my ability to get something right, even faith.
5. At the same time, the accusations I level at myself are often true. I have regularly had selective hearing when it comes to God's Word. Like the people of Amos' day I have assumed that God approved of my life and the things I do. Could it be that I am not called to a comfortable retirement, two cars in the garage, and a house just a little bit better than my neighbors' home? Does he really mean for my life to reflect Jesus in the way I spend my money too?

Gospel

1. God's kingdom has always worked in the midst of tragedy. Jesus' own death us but the root stock of a whole kingdom of God which is upside down and backwards to our view. But for all its strange and alien nature, it is the kingdom of God, it has a strange and pervasive power. Its proclamation also gives me courage and hope which no tragedy can squash.

2. And so God does not abandon me in my suffering. He surrounds me with fellow Christians and finds ways to strengthen me and help me. He knows the ploys of the evil one and has supplied me with gifts for this journey, bread for strength, water for cleansing, guidance and fellowship. Most importantly of all he has vouchsafed my status with him in my baptism, bestowing Spirit and unquenchable life itself.
3. Thus does God turn my tragedy into occasion for me to open my mouth and share my faith. He takes what should be sorrow and gloom and makes it occasion for joy and gladness. Paul can write from prison, we can cheerfully tell a nurse why we are not down despite our cancer. He calms me and opens my eyes to see something else.
4. Most of all he relieves me of a burden. I don't carry this thing. He has made me the heir, he has forgiven the sin, he has created the faith and he sustains it. He has made me righteous in his eyes and he will raise me from the grave. He gives my witness its power through the Spirit and he turns my darkest day into an occasion for his light to shine.
5. God may indeed have serious problems with the way we all live our lives. What we take for the good life may in fact be reprehensible to him. But Jesus did not come because we get it right, and the repentance to which he calls us starts today with the way I spend the few dollars in my pocket right now. He is not interested in the "what-if" discussions, but in the real and right now discussions which his Word empowers. He may not promise us comfortableness – but he does promise real comfort. You are his child no matter what.

Sermon Ideas

1. Heirs with Christ (Epistle - That the Spirit of God would move the hearer to faith which trusts that Christ has made him/her an heir of heaven, a truth which Satan, World and even my own sinful flesh cannot undo. My status is secure in Him which means I need fear no evil but may boldly and cheerfully meet this day in him.)

Paul reminds us that we are heirs of heaven today, people whom God has named in a will which was written on the day that Jesus, his only rightful son, died on a cross. The image here is one of a legal document which is enforced by a higher power than those who would say otherwise. Because Jesus died with us and for us, now our names are recorded in that book of life and heaven, the very kingdom of God, belongs to us. Like a child whose parents still live, we may have to wait through the years of this earthly journey before we possess in fact, but we are truly owners today.

That reality means we live this life a little differently. First of all, we are not finding our treasure in this life, its temptations and fleeting joys. My treasure is in heaven. But that also means I don't fear what this world or Satan throws at me either. He has tried lots of things over the years. Persecutions continue rage in some parts of the world. Here in North America he seems to try to kill us with affluence, but even in our excess he finds

things to make us afraid. Portfolios are at risk, pensions may fail, wars loom on the horizon, or may have even claimed someone we know or love. Health is always a fragile gift, one doctor's visit away from being shattered by a diagnosis of cancer or heart disease or the like. But in all these things, there is one thing that simply does not change. We are heirs of heaven. John the Baptist, and for this week's purposes we might just call him the first Christian, met his death today at the hands of Herod's headsman. But what was really taken from him that day they soldiers roused him from his cell and led him to the executioner? Was his life taken from him? In one sense yes, but in another and better sense, no, of course not. He too was an heir of heaven, you see, he too was a believer in Jesus. On the last day, when the dead are raised, Jesus will call his name, and John will rise to everlasting life, to honor and glory which will make the prison and the death he died seem like a trifle, a thing to be forgotten. God has made the same promise to us and he has rendered all our foes, be they anything that Devil and World can dream up, they are all small compared to what he has given us.

But this future hope is also a present reality to be lived boldly and fruitfully. Being a child of God and heir of heaven is not only a hope for the future it is a present truth as well. Empowered by Jesus, I am heaven's citizen, a breaking into this world of heavenly truth. I forgive sins. I love with Christ's love.

2. A Witness to the Crucified (OT/Gospel: That the hearer would believe that the cross has imprinted the whole kingdom of God. As a witness to Jesus we may be called upon to proclaim a message and bear the fury of the world, but Christ gives us strength to face the worst, and peace to meet it with grace and joy.)

This sermon might actually be better in a Bible study. It might be better in a dialogue. One can do this in an inductive sermon, which leads them to discover. Let them take the lead a little bit in hearing this.

John was killed because a pretty girl danced. So often our suffering seems to be random. Do we feel like our world and our suffering is out of control? It probably did for Mark's audience, which may be why we have these words before us today.

The logic is simple and seems so fool proof. God has all the power. God is my friend. Since my friend has all the power he should be able to pull a few strings for me and my life should be better for that friendship.

Alas, the kingdom of God does not work that way. Look no further than the life of the first believer in Jesus, John the Baptist who leapt at the approach of Jesus before he was born in Elizabeth's womb. He faithfully proclaimed the approach of the Savior he believed in. He was arrested and cruelly killed because a girl could dance and her mother bore a grudge. What a meaningless and terrible thing!

Thus is the kingdom of God. It was founded on the cruel and tortuous death of our Savior Jesus and that cross casts long shadows throughout the kingdom this side of heaven. The pattern which is John's and Jesus' has been repeated every generation. But there is hope even in the middle of this. For the salvation of the world was worked out on that cross. John was a prophet until his dying day. God has sent us out with a beautiful and potent message which the world hates and Satan fears. Preaching it might just mean that the world lashes out against us and we too will experience the bitterness of the cruciform kingdom.

Mark today challenges us to be brave and courageous in that day and to believe a few things along the way. First of all, persecution is not the sign of God's displeasure. It has been part of the deal from the beginning and we should not expect otherwise in this generation. Secondly, he gives strength to his people. John was a faithful proclaimer. He did not come to his prophetic task with any strength of his own, but it was God's strength that worked in him. John also died in hope. That too did not happen because he willed himself to hope, but because God gave him a hope which does not die. Most of all God gave peace. Paul writes these words to us from prison, John goes to his death, Jesus climbs Calvary's cruel slope in hope. Herod took what from John that day? Not his eternal life. That was tied up with Jesus and out of Herod's reach. So too the things that most important are in God's gentle hands. He knows that you may face some days of trial ahead, but he promises you that these things he will guard very carefully for you, your eternal life, your name, your righteousness, your hope.

3. You are beloved – the Mystery of Grace (Epistle: That the hearer would simply hear God swamp him/her in grace today. There is no demand made, there is no word of condemnation, only a litany of God's gracious act on our behalf)

We are really good at accusing ourselves, our human nature just seems to be prone to it, what is more, our enemy loves to get us dwelling on our imperfection if he thinks it can lead us to despair or to doubt God. This is really the Law of this sermon: our human tendency to put ourselves into the center of every picture. This can manifest in really interesting ways. Some young women can never believe that they are beautiful. Some people will never believe that they have done enough and work themselves to death. Others will struggle ever accept a gift from a friend or loved one, they are never worthy. This sermon really posits a complete reorientation of the human life. We are not the center of it all, and that is a good thing. God is the center and he is much better at that than we are. God has made us, we are not junk, but we can have a hard time hearing and believing that.

Today Paul drowns us in God's love, we are swimming in grace. In a flood of metaphors he runs through inheritance and adoption and eternal life, a catalogue of God's gifts to us through creation, redemption and the gift of the Spirit. Today God wants you to know one thing: He loves you! Don't listen to that nagging little voice which is in the back of

all our heads which says that he must not know about the time when.... He knows it, he knows it better than you, and he loves you anyway. He comes today with gifts in his hands for you. He is not here to tell you what to do or what you have failed to do, you know that, he has a much more important and beautiful thing to say to us. He loves you, He loves me.

For the next several weeks, we get to hear Paul unpack these verses for us and just what it means that God loves us. That will mean some transformative things, but today, this day, this week, God wants to start with the simple and best message of all. God loves you. It all starts here and if he doesn't get this through to us, all the exhortation is just so many rules and they really don't change a thing. He knows you and how you work. He will build on love, on his love, and on his gift to you.

4. Righteousness and Peace Kiss (Psalm: That the hearer would trust that God has resolved the great tension between a sinful world and a holy God in his Son, Jesus Christ.)

The last verses of the psalm would serve as the outline for this sermon.

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

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

The psalmist is fearful of what is coming. You may want to import earlier sections of the psalm. He remembers God's mercy but he is not sure whether it is coming. Would a community which is seeing its moral structure (homosexual marriage) and conceptual world (rabid tolerance regime) be in the same shoes today?

This might also be couched in terms of a drought in the west – we are painfully dry. Is nature gone amok?

The psalmist is hanging on what God says. He wants to hear it. We will need to put our people into that frame of mind somehow.

What follows is the real meat of the sermon. It is what God says:

¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.

Where we see only conflict and the possibility of warfare and destruction. God sees something else. God's steadfast love, that durable, everlasting love of God and his faithfulness come together. They combine for a different solution. God the promise keeper and God the one whose positive love for his creation is creating a solution to this tension. The righteous judgment of God cannot be left out. It is real. Judgment is real. Sin is real. This is not a sweeping of problems under the rug. This is dealing with it. God's righteous judgment and peace come together and kiss.

How can that be? God's righteousness is his holiness. He is perfect and demands that perfection from his creation, all of us. And we have not met his exacting demands. This does not call for peace but war. God comes with armies of angels and fiery servants who will destroy us. We are doomed!

But God's righteousness and his peace embrace and kiss. God has found the solution.

¹¹ Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.

God's faithfulness is to the promises that he has made. He made a promise to Abraham, to Adam, to David. He keeps that promise. A son of David does rule. The family of Abraham is a blessing to all the families on the earth. Adam's seed does crush Satan's power.

But righteousness is not left out of this. The faithfulness transpires here on the earth. God's promises are flesh and blood. Jesus is not some heavenly truth but an earthly reality. Thomas touched his wounds. The woman of two weeks ago touched his garment. He raised that little girl from the dead. Yet, righteousness looks down from the sky. It perceives the man hanging on that cross and counts his death as justice. This is no deception. God is not hoodwinked into accepting us. We are not brought into the kingdom of God through the back door, snuck in like some kids who did not pay for the theater seat they occupy. We belong there. As Paul says in Ephesians today, we are the adopted children of God.

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

The Lord gives what is good. The psalmist is not talking about prosperity here alone. The land was the promise which God had made to Abraham. The increase of the land is nothing less than the fulfillment of God's promise. This is all from God, not from us.

¹³ Righteousness will go before him
and make his footsteps a way.

The righteousness of God goes before God. It emanates from Him, it precedes him. It always is found where he is, but now it runs ahead of him and makes us right with God lest we be consumed by his holiness. Isaiah's call vision might make a good point to remember for your folks.

His footsteps have now become our way, the path of our life. We walk with Christ through death's cavernous maw, not fearful but confident. As he rose so shall I. Even the perils and traumas of this life are perceived differently now. The Assyrian may come and

destroy the land. But Jesus fled before Herod's threats and his friend was beheaded because a pretty girl danced. All those things, however, were not in the way. The way of Jesus often takes me through a valley of the shadow of death. I fear no evil there. His footsteps are my way.

5. He plans to unite all things in Christ (Epistle: that the hearer would rejoice to hear God's plan-the whole of creation will be united once more in Christ – despite all the divisions we see.)

The unity which God proposes is found in Christ. This sermon has to remain here and be preached from this spot. The world wants us to find unity in all sorts of things which are never going to work. We don't agree. We don't even always like each other. The United Nations is anything but united. The latest plan to find a grand unifying principle is not going to get us there. The first Civil Rights leaders understood this, they had read Paul rather well. Listen to the speeches of MLK and you will hear that he looked to God for this unity, not to laws or the efforts of men. But he saw the work of God through those things.

Satan is a divider. He plays on our self-centered and foolish natures to drive wedges between people. We want everyone to tolerate us, but we are not so good at tolerating others. We love to make the distinctions which draw attention to the fact that we are on the right side and "they" are on the wrong side. This is not the work of God, but of our enemy. He loves to make us alone and afraid, cut off from community.

God's will, expressed for all humanity, is life. He has sent his Son to save the world, not just parts of it, but he has died for all of it. He unites all things in this strange, mysterious, and inexhaustible act.

Paul's letter was speaking toward a real unity which happened. The Jewish and gentile Christian communities did indeed merge. They became indistinguishable within a few generations. The last distinctly Jewish Christian community we have records of was in Palmyra. It was still there in the 400's but not much longer. There are modern messianic Jewish communities, but they are modern.

The preacher will want to speak of the Eucharist here. All of us kneel and stand in this place. We are united in this common meal, this same blood courses our veins, this same flesh now makes up our flesh. That is a profound and real unity. It goes deeper than family. It makes us one, even when we are fighting over the budget or the color of the carpet in the remodeled classrooms.

This unity of Christ also is positive. Jesus unites us in his mission. He doesn't just put us all in the same room, but he sends us out with a common mission to proclaim his kingdom, to share his love with this world. There are lots of tactics, but they are all in service to one Lord. Paul will speak eloquently about this in this letter. There are many offices and roles that we fill, but there is one Faith, one Lord, one Baptism. The preacher

may want read chapters 3 and 4 of this letter because Paul really unpacks the ramifications of this unity for the congregation.

6. And also you (Epistle: That the hearer would believe that his/her Church touches upon the Church of the Apostles through the gift of the Holy Spirit)

This sermon will give the hearer the trust and insight to say that despite the problems, we are members of the same Church which the NT describes. We belong to the same community of faith which once was led by Peter, James, Paul, and the rest of the NT cast.

This sermon will address the perceptions that many of us have that our churches have somehow lost their fire, their purpose, or their authentic status as the Church.