

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – July 19 (Proper 11)

“I’m not worthy” used to be the cry of a character played by a comedian on Saturday Night Live. I wonder if he wasn’t Lutheran sometimes. Did you know that another character, Dana Carvey, was an LCMS Lutheran? But maybe it isn’t just a Lutheran thing, maybe it is a human thing. No one likes to be shown up as inadequate, so we lower expectations. No one likes to fail, so we don’t even try. No one likes to be seen as incompetent or poor at something, so we do what we are good at, what we can succeed at, what looks possible for us. But isn’t that usually pretty small?

Our readings today challenge our fear of inadequacy, but not our inadequacy itself. The Bible is quite willing to leave us inadequate. It goes on, however, to speak of an indwelling Spirit and Christ which is wholly adequate to any task.

In the Old Testament lesson Jeremiah looks ahead to a day when good and righteous shepherds shall tend the flock of God. Does that really describe me? Even if I haven’t run off with the Sunday offering or taken advantage of my position, have I not frittered away an afternoon on occasion? I have lost my temper when I should not have; I have made some dumb decisions. I forgot to visit the woman in the hospital and now she and her whole family are rather angry at me. Can you really say that I have shepherded the people of God ably and well? Perhaps better than some other guy, but did I really do it well? That might fill me with fear, especially as I contemplate appearing before the judge to whom I must give an account of my stewardship of his flock. These readings both acknowledge and challenge that fear.

In the Epistle reading Paul speaks of a reality that also seems to be so far away, a world in which the gracious relationship which God has established in Christ defines our lives. In his discussion Jew and Gentile live in peace. It is the natural outgrowth of grace. But then why does my congregation look more like the Balkans where Serbs and Croats and Bosnians plot revenge upon each other for offences which took place centuries in the past. Just change the nationalities to certain family names, shorten up the time scale to decades, and you pretty well have the situation. Are we inadequate as a congregation, as a Synod, as a Church?

In Mark’s account of the feeding of the five thousand, Peter and the rest of the disciples are sent out with a pitiful amount of food to feed the multitudes. They did not have enough, they were inadequate. Can you imagine the faith that took? Jesus said “Go feed them.” They had enough for five, perhaps ten, people. When they turned around they faced a thousand times that many before them. It would have been the easiest thing to tell the multitude to fend for themselves, to do nothing.

Is this not exactly what Jesus says to us today? I served a congregation of 50 active members in Bountiful Utah, a community of about 45,000 people at the time. It was 92% LDS. Nine out of ten folks in that town had a pretty skewed understanding of Jesus. God had put us there for them. It was easiest to just be our little selves in that community, to gather on Sunday and teach the

handful of children we had in Sunday School and offer a little VBS in the Summer, but not expect too much of it. We hunkered down inside our walls and the community had hardly any idea that we were there at all.

It was a transformative experience when we remembered that Jesus had put us there for them. Mormons have lots and lots of kids, so we opened a preschool and a day care. Surprisingly, despite the apparent wealth of the community, there were a lot of folks living beyond their means, on the edge of financial insolvency, there were times when they were simply hungry and did not have enough to make it to the next pay check. So we teamed up with the other five tiny little Christian congregations to open a food bank.

We figured we could all together feed about twenty families a month. A drop in the hunger bucket! But by the end of the first year we were feeding 200 hundred families a month. Out of the woodwork and from all sorts of quarters came support. Even the LDS were packaging up cereal in their dry pack plant for us. The postal workers conducted a food drive on our behalf and filled a gymnasium about five foot deep in boxes of food. Suddenly lots and lots of people knew we were there, what is more they knew that Christians and the Lord they follow was concerned about how hungry they were.

It would have been much easier for us to do nothing, to say we did not have enough, and to let our fears of failure and inadequacy determine our course of action. No one would have blamed us if we had just been a little congregation that did not have the ability to feed a town. But we had Jesus, he likes to feed people, and though our resources were far too small, we turned around with the little we had and invited them to sit down.

The preschool was a little different matter. It served some children very well and did some great things for the community, but finally, after several years, it simply was not viable and the congregation did not have the resources to continue this ministry. It closed after about 8 years of operation. Had we failed? No. Every child who walked through our doors heard the Jesus story, had a hug from a Christian who cared, found a safe, warm, and loving place while their mom and dad worked. But the LDS are not terribly supportive of day care, and many of the families were living on the edge of financial insolvency and so were using their large extended families to watch the kids while they worked.

We tried, it did not work like we thought, but we regretted none of it. It was a very good thing to do. Jesus blessed us and the ministry in the process, and he blessed a bunch of people who came.

Today we will hear the fear of our inadequacy challenged. Will we listen to the Savior who promises to stand by our side with all his resources or will we look to the feebleness of our own strength and resources. What will make the decision for us?

These texts challenge our fear of inadequacy in a particular way. They first take the fear away. God removes from us the burden of success. He will make it work. But the texts don't just take away the fear, they replace it with hope. God stands behind our words and deeds. He brings his

resources to the table and his resources are vast. This might just work much better than we could ever imagine! I can engage in ministry with a joyful, hopeful expectation. I will get to see what God does!

Collect of the Day

Heavenly Father, though we do not deserve Your goodness, still You provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy spirit that we may acknowledge Your gifts, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

We see this prayer more than once in the pericope system.

Why do we ask for something which we already have? Did not God give us the Holy Spirit in our baptism? Did we not get the whole thing? It is a great question whose answer gives us an occasion to think more deeply about the work of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Spirit is not a once-for-all sort of thing. We have the whole Spirit, but he is always being given as well. He is like a water fall and we are standing underneath that flow. He “proceeds” from the Father and the Son, notice this is not a onetime sort of thing, but an ongoing procession. One might also talk about this relationally. We don’t say to our wife on the day after our wedding, “I love you, honey.” and then imagine that since we have told her that she should just remember it for the rest of our marriage. At least I hope you have not done that.

If we are dealing with a person who does not sense the Holy Spirit, then we want to run to Baptism. The external nature of that sacrament, the promise of God that says that the water which touched our heads conveyed the Holy Spirit, is critical in that situation. But that is like running back to the marriage license to make sure you are married. It is true, it is a witness, but it is not the only witness to that Holy Spirit. Faith itself is a witness to the Holy Spirit as is a life which struggles with sin and sanctity.

Notice particularly the sequence of actions that are in the petition part of the prayer. We ask God for the Holy Spirit so that we may first acknowledge, then give thanks, and lastly serve God in a willing obedience. The sequence is critical and the word which is most important of all is the participle which modifies the obedience: willing. Obedience is not hard to come by. Just wave a gun in someone’s face and chances are you can get them to do quite a bit. Drag some money in front of them and ask them to do revolting things and you have the makings of a popular television show.

But willing obedience is a totally different matter. The one you willingly obey is really your God, you see. For most of us that deity is none other than ourselves. We will listen to what we want to, we will do what we want to, and if someone makes us do otherwise we will grouse and complain about it, even if they do pay us. We might do what they ask but we won’t do it willingly.

So what is the key to that sort of willing obedience, the very willing obedience which Paul describes as his whole mission in his letter to the Romans where he calls it the Obedience of

Faith (chapters 1 and 16)? He describes this process for us in the letter to the Ephesians today, but the prayer also encapsulates it for us. The whole thing begins with a gift undeservedly given. God reaches to us, despite our rebellious and self-centered natures. He loves us despite ourselves.

The next step is that God opens our eyes to see what he has done that we acknowledge it. To acknowledge a gift from God is to see first and foremost that it is gift. I have not earned this, I have not deserved it, and I have been given it. This gift is graceful.

That acknowledgement is critical for the next phase of this transition to the willingly obedient. I am thankful. One unbelieving man once told me that was the greatest difference he had ever noticed between Christians and non-Christian people. The Christians were much more thankful than the rest of them. Thanksgiving is the posture of the Christians turned toward the great life giver and offering up the whole self to him. The bigger the gift, the bigger the thanksgiving, this is why I always suggest making sins big. Not because that saves us, but because the whopper forgiven is the occasion for a greater thanksgiving.

Lastly comes the service. The service is not itself even what is the final goal, it is not that God needs more servants. The angels are really pretty good at taking care of the dusting in heaven, if you know what I mean. Their choral offerings are much better than my singing. God is not after the service for the service's sake, he is after the servant. God is after my heart. The service is offered willingly. God loves the cheerful giver Paul said in II Corinthians.

Oddly enough, this actually works. Perhaps it works too infrequently in our world and it is easy for us to become jaded and cynical about all this. But people really are transformed by this process. If you have not seen this in a parishioner, you need to get out and talk to them more. I bet there are a bunch of stories within your congregation, no matter how small, of people who show up on Sunday, who give their time, their money, and their whole lives to a Jesus whom they love. God has worked a miracle in their hearts. The wonder perhaps is that we can find it hard to see.

For the citizens of the Roman Empire in the first, second, and third centuries, the Christian message asked them to imagine a world in which everyone was a child of God. That was a radical re-vision of the world in which they lived. And ultimately, after 1500 years of struggle, that vision has come to fruition in many of the lands of the Roman Empire. There are still those who are slaving away, and there are still people in bondage, but the culture abhors it. The Romans thought it was normal. Christianity has done much for us and all people this way.

Readings

Jeremiah 23:1-6

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD.

²Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to

them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. ³ Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴ I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD.

⁵ “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’

⁷ “Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when they shall no longer say, ‘As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,’ ⁸ but ‘As the LORD lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.’ Then they shall dwell in their own land.”

This is one of those days when you can be glad you know Hebrew, or at least that you know someone who knows Hebrew. Jeremiah proclaims a righteous branch, a ruler who will not be like the stinker king he has right now. Jeremiah is obviously not happy with the current administration. They are the shepherds who should be attending to the needs of the flock. Instead, they are scattering the flock, driving them away, not attending to them. The result is that God will attend these shepherds for their evil deeds. There is no ambiguity here. Jeremiah proclaims judgment on those in power.

Through Jeremiah God promises that he will gather the scattered remnant of his people and set over them true and caring shepherds. They will multiply and be fruitful. Then they will not be afraid or dismayed and none shall be missing. The days are coming when a righteous branch to David’s withered stump of a dynasty shall sprout up. He shall reign as king and deal wisely and execute justice and righteousness. Judah will be saved, Israel dwell securely. His name shall be...Here is where it is really good to know Hebrew...His name shall be “Zedekiah” or translated “The Lord is our Righteousness.”

This is where Jeremiah really gets himself in trouble, for the king of the land at that time was named “Zedekiah.” Jeremiah is saying that in that day God will raise up a king who really lives up to his name. This is nasty, this is like one of those political cartoons which pillories a president for his looks. One only has to think of Nixon’s bulbous nose or G. W. Bush’s ears, or even the current occupant’s toupee. They have all shown up in those political cartoons. This is Jeremiah poking at the name of the king and wondering when God will raise up a real “Zedekiah.”

You can imagine this did not win Jeremiah any friends in high places. Jeremiah used to have friends in high places. He used to be the advisor to the king of Judah when Zedekiah’s father

Josiah had reigned. Together they had championed a serious reform of the temple and the religious life of the nation. After Josiah's untimely death at the hands of the Egyptians, his sons, first Jehoiakim and then Zedekiah had done their best to reverse Josiah's religious program, perhaps as a bit of demagoguery aimed at the many who worshipped the Baals or perhaps out of genuine religious conviction. In any event, Jeremiah was a has-been. He was the counselor to a dead king who was not welcome in the courts of the current occupant of David's throne.

How exactly the king was scattering the people is not clear. It could be that his refusal to trust God and to make an alliance with Egypt meant that Jeremiah could see the Babylonians coming once more to finish the job they did in the days of Zedekiah's brother Jehoiakim when they took out the first group of exiles. Perhaps they were already fleeing because they could, like Jeremiah, read he writing on the wall. Jeremiah's assessment of the king is damning. God will not protect him, if anything, God will punish him, will strike him for his evil ways. Salvation will come to the people through another son of David, not this one. For any king, the threat of a distaff member of the royal throne making a bid for the throne was ever-present. Just suggesting this could get Jeremiah in a lot of trouble, even killed as a seditionist.

Of course we are reading this because the creators of our pericope system see that the righteous branch, the ruler of Israel and the king of Judah who rules justly and wisely is none other than Jesus. That of course makes us his subjects, the sheep gathered who dwell in safety without fear. Does that accurately describe us? Probably not, at least if we listen to the news, but in another respect of course it does. The Devil, our ancient foe, has been defeated. Death no longer has a hold over us, we are free from its clutches. Sin may bedevil us, but it cannot truly terrify us. Jesus has laid down his life for all our guilt, it is gone. We live in a kingdom of Grace.

Where do we encounter this kingdom of Grace, this authority of God's righteous kingdom, ruled over by our just and wise king? Of course kingdoms are all about authority, and in this case it is the authority to do good, to forgive sins, to give life. As members of the baptized community, we are all empowered to be forgivers of sins. When we speak, God assures us that he speaks through us. That is an authority statement. When we say "take and eat, take and drink" that too is an exercise of the authority of God. He is the host at that table, we are His servants, our invitation and our feeding of the flock there is done with his approval, knowledge, plan, and intent. It is authorized. That is why it is important that we do not seize this role and duty, but that it be given to us by the congregation and properly bestowed upon the office we bear.

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

³ He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

What can I really say about this Psalm. Jeremiah yearns for a righteous shepherd for his people. This good shepherd is none other than the LORD, the same God who took up human nature and speaks to me today in Gospel and causes my cup to run over with forgiveness at this rail. He comforts me with the rod of his mouth, the staff of his servants.

*If you want to do a fun thing with this psalm, preach on the pronouns. “The LORD is **my** shepherd, **I** shall not want. **He** makes **me** to lie down in green pastures....” You get the idea. Just reading the psalm this way and emphasizing this and explaining it makes a very interesting proclamation.*

I have also, at times, simply used the verses of the psalm as an outline of my sermon. I read a line and expound upon it. David has us in several emotional states before the end of this thing, but I would imagine that considering the rest of the readings it is verse 4 which will resonate with us. We walk through the valley of the shadow of death. That is a fearsome thing to do. But God’s shepherding tools, his rod and staff, they comfort me. He might whack me on the head with that staff and pull me from the precipice with the crook.

Ephesians 2:11-22 The first ten verses of this chapter appear elsewhere in our pericope system and verses 8-9 are regular fare for Sunday School kids to memorize. But their omission from our series of readings is a serious gap in the logic of Paul’s letter. What he proclaims in vss. 11-22 is impossible without vss. 1-10 so I provide them here.

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of

mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

How do we illustrate the idea of this chapter? Paul is connecting the baptismal resurrection of vss. 1-10 with the practicalities of vss. 11-22.

- *Athletics? The ball player who is on the team practices, the professional practices a great deal. If I would declare myself an athlete but never actually participate in the sport, am I really a ball player?*
- *The lifeguard who saves the drowning man has given him a new life in a sense. Every day from that point on is different. The person who has a heart transplant or other modern medical miracle might feel the same way. The life we live is wholly a gift.*

We also found seven interesting words to describe our separation:

1. *Separated/cut off (note the circumcision implication)*
2. *Alienated/excluded/strangers*
3. *Having no hope/hopeless*
4. *Without God*

5. *Distant/far off*
6. *No peace/hostility*
7. *Dividing walls of hostility.*

Notice how Paul's words here address all of these. We are made one, united in the flesh of Christ. He becomes our unity/peace. We have access to God in the Spirit. We are no longer far away, but close. The dividing wall of hostility has been broken down. Jesus, in his body, on the cross, has killed the hostility. Hostility is dead to me just as Jesus died for me. In its place, resurrected, is a shalom/peace. Does that mean I live that way? Does Christ's undoing of the hostility translate into a life which has no enmity? Can it?

We noted last week that Luke Timothy Johnson considers this letter to be Paul's capstone letter, the summary of his ministry, written from prison, to encourage all the congregations. A circular letter, it was designed to be read in every congregation, hence it really does not deal with a specific problem.

But Paul does deal with a problem, and it is a problem of universal nature. The human tendency to create divisions and distinctions is ever present. In the first half of the first century the struggle was located in the relationship between Jew and Gentile. This conflict had plagued much of Paul's ministry. His letters to the Galatians, Romans, Colossians, and others will address this question. The first council in Jerusalem in Acts 15 was summoned to deal with it. Paul was arrested to save him from a mob of Jews in Jerusalem who sought to kill him over this issue. This is a big issue for Paul, the biggest of his whole ministry.

Oddly enough, by the end of the century this manifestation of the issue largely went away. The Jewish Christian community was expelled from the Jewish synagogues shortly after the failed Jewish rebellion of 68-70 AD and shortly after that they were more or less absorbed into the much larger Gentile Christian Church. The last group of actively practicing ancient Jewish Christians who still followed the kosher laws was in Edessa and we last hear of them in the fourth and fifth centuries.

But the beauty, potency, and love of what Paul has to say here are timeless and appropriate to every age because we have not learned how to do this yet. His argument is based on the first part of the chapter, hence its inclusion above. In the first verse notice how we were dead, helpless, spiritual corpses. Follow the progression of the person through the next nine verses and you will find us by verse ten alive and well, standing up, off life-support, doing the things which God had established for us to do. This gracious action by God is key to understanding the exhortation in the second part of the chapter.

Death has proven to be the ultimate equalizer. No one is excluded from that pit, and it has rendered the old prejudice and enmity meaningless. The Jews and the Gentiles, once foes, are now of the same household in Christ. If you have Russians in your community you might want to remember the story of Boris and Gleb, the passion bearers of Russia. They took this so much to

heart that they died rather take up arms against their brother, Vladimir, when it came time to fight for the throne of their father. Their willingness to die inspired the Russian people to convert to Christianity and did much to bring a different sort of ethos to the violent Slavic peoples of 1000 years ago. Even if you don't have any Russians in your parish, if they are in your community, this is a story your people should know so they can talk to them. I once sat on a plane by a young man who was named Gleb. Can you imagine attending middle school in Los Angeles with that name? He did and was proud of his name.

Paul speaks to the Jewish and Gentile issues, but where does the divide occur today? So many people do not equate Christians with openness and inclusiveness. Shouldn't they? The parable of the prodigal son suggests that God forgives everyone outrageously. Is there anyone whom God has not loved in Christ? If there isn't anyone, why do some people not know it?

Paul speaks of a unity that is established by the body and blood of Christ which was broken and shed on a cross. He speaks of a single building which was erected on the foundation of Apostles and Prophets, the Bible. This is really core Lutheran stuff, but why do we struggle with the point that Paul wanted to make? Most of our churches are too white to be honestly representative of our increasingly multi-ethnic society. We do not reach outside our comfortable middle class American roots very well or very often. Why is that? What hope does Paul offer us?

First of all, Paul does not say that we need to fix this. Christ has eliminated the hostility, he has become our peace. We do not gin it up. What is more, when Paul wrote, this was an ongoing process of reconciliation. It took time, it did not happen overnight. Paul addresses this because it had been and would be for some time an issue which these people faced. Failure does not mean it is impossible, indeed the best things often require us to fail and try again. But we really dare not try.

And of course, the reality is that we all have access to the same Father, by the death of the same Son, through the gift of the same Holy Spirit. God really is the unifying force here. When he grabs hold of folks that is a powerfully transformative experience. You might also want to remember the story of Robert E. Lee, the famous civil war general who fought to maintain the right to own slaves. In his later days he attended first Presbyterian Church in Richmond, VA. It was segregated and the black members of the congregation had to commune after the whites did. One day a black man came down from the balcony and presented himself at the altar with the white folks. Silence fell over the assembly and no one knew quite what to do or even think about this until a white haired gentleman got up from his pew and slowly walked down to the front of Church. There Robert E. Lee knelt down beside his fellow Christian, a black man, and there did he commune from the same cup from which that man had drunk a moment before.

This can seem insurmountable and Paul knows it. The temple of Herod had a dividing wall which separated the ethnic Jews from the proselyte believers. A gentile, even one who had been circumcised and was practicing Judaism, was not allowed to cross over that boundary.

Archeologists have found signs indicated that the punishment for crossing that wall without being a Jew was death. Paul says Jesus breaks down the wall, he ripped the curtain in two!

Paul apparently lived this radical re-estimation of all humanity. In Acts 18 it appears a Jewish leader in Corinth, Sosthenes, tried to kill him. Yet in I Corinthians, written a few years later, he would call Sosthenes a brother. In Philippians 1 he can look at the fellows who take advantage of his imprisonment and be glad because they preach Christ. In II Corinthians he says that he sees no one in the same way. They are all a new creation in Christ (II Corinthians 4-5). At the end of Philippians he enjoins two women to reconcile. He thought others also could live with this new estimation of all humanity.

But we are not there. We don't live this way and I frankly struggle with this. Paul was not a terribly forgiving sort of fellow prior to his encounter with Jesus on that road to Damascus either. Christ worked this change in him. Christ is our reconciliation as well. We are given a new way to see people. They are all simply the folks for whom Jesus died. That doesn't change no matter what they have done.

Another really good way to run with this text is to riff off of II Samuel 7 in which David wants to build a temple and God tells him that his son will build a temple and God will build David into a "house," a dynasty. While Solomon thought he was the fulfillment of that prophecy when he completed the temple and dwelt securely on the throne of David, Paul is saying that Jesus is the real fulfillment of the II Samuel promise to David. Jesus reigns as king and David's Son and he has built the real and lasting temple to God, the Church, in which the Holy Spirit of God dwells. We are the stones of that church, Jesus is the cornerstone, the prophets and apostles – Bible – serve as the foundation. This confronts the current understanding of the Church. We like to think that we are the church because we joined the church, we voluntarily associated. But this sermon would tell us that God has made the Church. Jesus is the "mortar" – the love and forgiveness which bind people together- he calls us Church, he calls the church into being. He makes us church.

Mark 6:30-44

⁷ And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts—⁹ but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. ¹⁰ And he said to them, "Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. ¹¹ And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." ¹² So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. ¹³ And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

³⁰ The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. ³⁵ And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. ³⁶ Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” ³⁷ But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” ³⁸ And he said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” And when they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” ³⁹ Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. ⁴¹ And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. ⁴² And they all ate and were satisfied. ⁴³ And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. ⁴⁴ And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.

All the Gospel writers tell this story, which makes it almost unique. Very few stories make it into all four of the Gospel accounts. For the disciples who told and retold the Jesus stories this must have left quite an impression and it must have been incredibly meaningful for the first audiences who were largely made up of slaves and who must have lived in a perpetual state of hunger. Jesus undoes the very curse of Adam here. No one sweats for this food; no one battled thistle and thorn for it. Jesus feeds the multitudes as the first parents ate in the garden here.

But our refrigerators are full these days, the specter of hunger probably does not haunt our members, if anything, a surfeit of food is our enemy. If food doesn't go to waste, it ends up going to our waists. We spend big dollars in this country trying to lose the fat which Mark's audience probably could only imagine having. We might find ourselves yawning at this, or at least hoping that it was whole wheat or some artisan bread. I wonder if Jesus made some gluten-free bread for the gluten intolerant in their midst.

And yet, amid such plenty, we all know that there are starving people in our own country and around the world. This message of Jesus feeding hungry people may only increase in relevance if the articles I read in my National Geographic are any indication. The Green Revolution is not keeping pace with the swelling ranks of humanity, or at least that is what they say.

Being for the most part middle class Americans, people of limited but considerable means, it would be excusable if we thought this passage was written for someone else. We are not the starving of the world. We have enough to eat, we might complain about the prices in our grocery, but we get by. We could spiritualize this text and turn the eating into a metaphor for the

faith relationship and talk about how God “feeds” us in all sorts of ways. That is one way to go with this text and I have heard good sermons preached on that basis.

But I want to suggest that there is another way to read this thing, and that is as a disciple. I think this may be as much about them and what Jesus asks them to do. Mark tells us that this whole thing gets set up because they are exhausted and they don't even have time to eat for themselves. Finally Jesus takes them away, to get them a little space, but it doesn't work. (Or does it work exactly like Jesus intended?) The crowds have followed them into the wilderness and Jesus has compassion on them. He continues to minister to them until the disciples urge him to send them away so the crowds can buy something to eat.

Jesus says to them, “You give them something.” The disciples respond that this would take 200 denarii. (A denarius was the coin which a laborer earned for one day's labor. If you do the math, at current rates of about \$10/hour for a day laborer, that comes to \$80/day, or \$16,000. If you divide that by the number of people who ate, 5000, you get to a lunch for a cost of just over \$3/person. That is actually about right.) You can buy an inexpensive new car for \$16,000, certainly a very nice used car.

But Jesus has something else in mind than breaking the group's treasury. He asks them how much they have to eat. They go check and the disciples can rustle up five loaves and two dried fish. This would not really have been enough for Jesus and his twelve disciples, but at least they could have eaten. (Remember Mark points out that they have not had time to eat.)

Jesus tells them to have the people sit down and that they, the disciples, should feed them. The people are seated in groups of fifties and hundreds. That is the way the Old Testament describes the military unit for the Israelite armies. I have heard lots of attempts to make sense of this, perhaps Jesus is proclaiming a new Israel or something like this. Perhaps it is just a quirky detail remembered by Peter as he told this to Mark.

The disciples bring the bread and fish to Jesus, he blesses and breaks and hands the five loaves and two fish back to Peter and the rest. You can imagine him motioning them to turn around and feed the multitude. I wonder if Peter did not whisper “Come and get it.” If you have dealt with a large group of hungry people, you know that this can get ugly very quickly. To face five thousand hungry people with only five loaves of bread and two fish, must have been terrifying. But as they distribute something happens. They all receive, they all eat and are satisfied, and there are more leftovers than they started with.

So what does this all have to do with us? Jesus has sent us out into the world with a mandate to feed them. There are literally people starving for calories in our communities. But they are also starving for the relationship which God would establish with them through Christ. And Christ sends us to them. We look at our resources of time and skill and find that we are less than adequate.

It must have taken faith for Peter and the rest of the disciples to turn around and face that hungry mob of people. It was an act of faith to reach into that basket and hand the first person a piece of bread and to keep reaching into the basket to hand out the next and the next and the next. What if Peter had said, "This isn't enough, I need to conserve resources for myself."? Or what if he had said, "I don't have enough to do the job well, and until I have those resources in place, we will have to just wait."?

What if we say the same things? Does God ask us to look today at the hungry and the dying of this world, and with inadequate resources and pitiable bank accounts to go forth and clothe them, feed them, save them? Do we listen to our fears of inadequacy or the specter of our failure more than we listen to him?

Law

1. I am unworthy and incompetent. I might fake some of the people some of the time, but my wife knows it, I know it, the people who know me best know my weaknesses. Worse God knows it.
2. I hate to fail, thus I am afraid of failure. There are a lot of things I will fail at. It is pretty obvious that I should not be a surgeon or a nuclear engineer. That would be a disaster. But my fear of failure also keeps me from trying lots of things. It makes sense that I don't put someone's life in my unskilled hands. But evangelism isn't brain surgery. It is really simply living out what I am. Why am I afraid of it? Am I afraid to breathe? Am I afraid to read the paper or talk to my family or help a neighbor?
3. Ultimately this is a faith problem. Jesus has told me that he is working through me and in my ministry, but I am not sure that he will do it my way or what I expect, and so I won't move until I know it will succeed. The result is that I don't move very often. I am a really pathetic shepherd, in Jeremiah's idiom.
4. How many hungry people are dying today because we have thought that we don't have enough to feed them? How many die lonely, afraid, and without Jesus because we thought they would reject us? How many suffer today because we rightly conclude we can do nothing for them, but forget that Jesus can.
5. Paul describes a community which is united by the overwhelming action of God. My people, my family, even I seem decidedly underwhelmed by God these days. This is not a time of zealous love which breaks down the ancient barriers of sin, but what Paul seems to describe it well with the phrase, "their love grows cold."

Gospel

1. God knows my weakness, that is also good news, because he has not left me or cast me aside, instead he has put me, despite my weakness, into the center of the very kingdom of God. I am the herald of the good news, the kingdom makes its proclamation through me. my weakness and ineptitude does not prevent this, in fact God uses it.
2. Thus God has reached out to me and given me a gift. I am who I am. The Lord knows it and gives me place and purpose in his kingdom. He forgives me my errors and failings, puts his arms around me and assures me that it will really be OK. His love encourages and empowers me.
3. So Jesus first establishes a relationship with me, just had with Peter and the disciples when he asked them to feed the multitudes. They probably had no idea of what was about to happen, but they knew the man who stood behind them and had blessed this bread and fish before they distributed it.
4. Now, I am given to see this world very differently because Jesus has been at work in me. Yes the problems are vast and I don't have the money or the power to change much. But when I swim in and love with Jesus love, I have the very resources of God behind me. I don't know what will happen, but I know the guy who stands behind me. I know the one who will make my work into His work and empower it with possibility.
5. Christ still pours out his Spirit, Christ still fills his people with love. He opens my eyes to see today that this is not a thing of the past, but his present work as well.

Sermon Ideas

1. He is our Peace (Epistle – That the hearer would expect God to work peace through them and in their community.)

Recent events have opened a window of opportunity for a sermon like this. Worshipers in a service in South Carolina have been gunned down by a young racist. Young black men have been gunned down by the police. Riots have broken out in major cities across the US and protests have taken place in others, likely yours. We have all seen the images on television, the Internet, and in our periodicals. The peace we imagined has been proven to be a lie. Race remains a serious issue in the US and that applies to churches too. Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in most peoples' week. Does our parish reflect our community when it comes to color and ethnicity? Why or why not?

But the Gospel comes into our lives here. Peace is not found because we do something, or at least because we create it. Peace comes because Jesus has made it. Christian churches have a long history of being places where barriers have been broken down. The early church broke the barrier between Jewish and Gentile Christians that occupied Paul. They also broke down the barriers between slave and free, rich and poor, and more. It was

Christian missionaries who sought out and included within the body of Christ my tree worshipping ancestors in Europe. They were a pretty barbarous lot, but those missionaries did not see my ancestors as an “other” who needed to be exterminated or destroyed, but as a child of God for whom Jesus died. He created a peace where warfare had been.

In the lead up to the Civil War in the United States it was the Christians who took up the abolitionist standard and tied freedom for slaves to their fundamental unity with all mankind in Christ. The Lutherans of the community in which I grew up had suffered terribly at the hands of bushwhackers because they had the temerity in western Missouri to challenge the institution of slavery. (Jesse and Frank James rode with that group and were part of a group which slaughtered 25 men in my home town on Oct. 10, 1864.)

More recently the civil rights movements and many others have taken their Christianity into action to be agents of peace in the world, replacing hatred with brotherhood. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa might yield some illustrations as might the current situation in the Balkans or among the Christians of Palestine. The Lutheran Church in Bethlehem has been the center of some inspiring efforts to bridge the Arab-Israeli divide.

In proclaiming the fact that Jesus is the peace, the preacher should prepare the hearer. Jesus has a scandalous ability to love the people I loathe. The peace he creates is rarely along the lines of anything I would of my human nature want. He creates and does things without asking my permission or approval. I am out of control of this peace and it can get pretty uncomfortable. The truth is he loves everyone, even the homosexuals, the illegal immigrant, the drug users, and whoever else might sit on your congregants’ list of “evildoers.” Just as the missionaries came to my barbarian ancestors who were burning the Christian villages Jesus may send me to the people I believe are destroying society or overturning something I hold dear. He may tell me to love them.

2. Agents of the Almighty (Gospel - That the hearer would believe that God stands behind them in their Christian life, empowering their words and deeds to make a real difference, to have eternal significance and to be an opportunity for the kingdom to come and God’s will to be done.)

It is pretty easy to become that anonymous sort of Christian, either as a person or as a whole congregation. We are after all small parts of a very large body of Christ. He has lots of folks who are better at things than we are, smarter, richer, more spiritually developed and aware sorts of people. I am just another peon in the kingdom of God, happy to be here, but don’t get your expectations too high about me. I probably will screw things up if I shoot too high; after all, I am pretty sure that I am not even really able to teach Sunday School.

But God does not see us that way. He knows we don't have what it takes to be players in any kingdom, let alone heaven's kingdom, which is why he stands behind us and works through us. Jesus had an important lesson to teach us through those disciples today. They turned to face the hungry multitudes without enough to even feed themselves very well. He asked for all they had, blessed all they had, and returned all they had to them with the mandate to go and feed them. But while it was foolish to think that so many could feast on so little, they also knew that this was no ordinary moment in history. They knew the man who stood behind them. They had seen him raise the dead, calm the storms, cast out the demons and give sight to the blind. They had not seen him feed the multitudes, yet. But they knew him and the strength that was in those hands and the love that was in those eyes. So they walked out without enough, and began to feed the first hungry man they found.

So too, God sends us out today, no we don't have enough to do it all, but it won't get done if we don't start. What is more, he sends us out with this strange hope. The same one who made the loaves and fishes enough is at work in us. I cannot tell you exactly what that means, or even if what we will try to do will succeed, but I can tell you that Jesus will be working through it. He might use our failure to open an even better door, but we won't know if we stand here with our hands in our pockets counting our few coins and waiting to have enough to get started. That is not the way the kingdom works. Jesus miracles demand faith, faith of us, faith of them. Jesus has made a promise, he is with us, he works through us. See the world with his eyes, and feed a hungry man today.

Mark's audience was afraid. They were being told that their faith was pointless and worthless. Our people often have the same fear. The disciples could have looked at their pitiful little loaves and fishes and just said that it was pointless. What difference did it make if another slave stood up and confessed Christ and died for it? Slaves died all the time. But the Roman empire would be changed by those slaves dying in arenas. Even what the world would call an abject failure is an occasion for Jesus to work.

We too fear that we are too small and powerless. Jesus tells all of us that our words and deeds are significant in his kingdom. Like a mustard seed, like a peasant carpenter on a cross, like a slave in the arena, like....? Like you and me. God works this way.

3. Citizens of another Kingdom (OT – That the Holy Spirit would free the hearer from fear and anger at current events, turning his/her eyes toward the other kingdom of which we are citizens, the kingdom of Christ.)

There are lots of folks who are trying to get us riled up right now. Homosexual marriage, Islamic terrorists, European debt crisis and collapsing Chinese stock markets give a certain element of the chattering classes too much to talk about and they usually want to make me afraid.

Jeremiah lived in a time when folks had good reasons to be afraid. The kingdom had fallen to the Babylonians. The current puppet of the Babylonians was in open revolt against the Mesopotamian overlords and Jeremiah probably did not need a gift of the Holy Spirit to see what was coming. The Babylonians were coming and this would not go well.

He called his people to look forward to a time when they would be ruled by another king 'Zedekiah' (see the notes above). This righteous one would really live to that beautiful name. Of course he is Jesus and we live in his kingdom right now.

But as we all know, living in that kingdom is not lazy days with nothing to do and nothing to fear. Christ has come, his kingdom proclaimed, and we work hard, worry hard, and die all the same. What does this mean?

We cannot call people to focus on the next life to the exclusion of this life. Jeremiah wasn't doing that and neither should we. His hope in the kingdom of the real Zedekiah was intended to lead his reader to live in this life differently. The earthy powers were failing, but that did not mean his readers should crawl under a rock and whimper. Jeremiah called his generation to lives of integrity and authenticity when the government and the society was corrupt and leading many astray.

Our citizenship in the kingdom of Jesus means we don't put all our trust in the leaders of our state or the culture in which we live. There will be times, and perhaps now it is here, when to be a Christian means living a life deliberately in obedience to another kingdom than the political one in which we live and at odds with the consumerism or tolerance regimes which govern our culture.

That life is defined by the vision which Jeremiah and others had. Here the preacher will want to point to the shepherding imagery and go to the explication of the 23rd Psalm. Our kingdom is not one of armies and power and force, at least not yet. Right now our king rules through forgiveness, love, and compassion. The current cultural trends of uncritical tolerance and unbounded consumerism are already starting crack. We don't need to take up arms against them. That will happen on its own. Down the street from my house the neighborhood has risen up to buy and destroy an adult video arcade and strip club which was located across the street from a massive apartment complex filled with young families. The joy which we are reading in the press releases is positively intolerant of strippers and employees and employers in the sex industry. Of course they should be intolerant of that, because this industry enslaves and destroys the lives of people and put the children in that apartment complex into a dismal environment where women were exploited. Tolerance and consumerism which are ends to themselves very quickly topple under the weight of their own narcissism and vice. We need to position ourselves to be there to pick up the pieces in Christ's love. We are called to that kingdom, not the one in

which young women and everything else are for sale and all is tolerated because we dare not judge the behavior of another.

4. Heirs of Heaven (Epistle - That the hearer would believe God's promise and thus live in a kingdom which God has defined and which we will all see fully with eyes of flesh on that last day.)

There are lots of troubles in this world. Paul dealt with a particularly tough problem of bigotry and racism of a sort in the first century and that has not really changed by the twenty-first century. We have elected a black man president of our country, but we are kidding ourselves if we think we have arrived in a post-discrimination age. It would be tempting to think that we should just give up on this world and focus on the next world, a pure and spiritual world where these things don't happen. But that is not what God enjoins on us today. Jeremiah sees a world in which the king will live up to his name, "The Lord our Righteousness." Paul honestly expects the members of his congregation to put aside their ancient enmities and realize that they are brothers and sisters in Christ, one building, a temple of the same Holy Spirit. Jesus does not tell his disciples to pray for the souls of the hungry folks who are before them, he tells them to feed them. Heaven is not a future reality, but a current truth, a reality in which God invites us to live right now. We may not see it all the time, it may have to peek out from behind the gore and clutter of this broken world, but God invites us to live in it, right now. Unlike Jeremiah, we have a king who lives up the name and who has placed over us undershepherds, yes sinful men, but whose words bring us life and forgiveness. He has empowered our relationships to put aside the past and forgive the sin and be brothers once more. He has expressed his care for the hurting and hungry of this world and sent us out to feed the multitudes, clothe them, teach them, help them and he loves it when we do, when heaven itself breaks into this world, in some small or great way. He delights to see us minister thus so he equips and establishes that kingdom for our sake, give us that opportunity.

5. He has killed hostility (Epistle: That the Spirit would call and equip the hearer to be an agent of peace in home, congregation, and every circle of community.)

I want to kill the hostile person, the one who is angry or hurtful to me. But he slays the hostility which dwells in my heart.

Paul was a remarkable person, but Jesus has been making remarkable people all along. (See in the notes above for the back story about this.) This sermon will proclaim that Jesus works miracles in people.

We often feel a need for a balance. Being a peacemaker and losing the hostility does not mean we are "doormats." How do we balance this? How does being assertive about what is right not become aggressive and angry?

The sermon may well want to explore the idea of Shalom. When Paul speaks of peace he is likely thinking in terms of the Aramaic/Hebrew concept. Peace is very holistic. It involves much more than simply a cessation of hostility. It involves healthy and joyful relationships and both financial and physical health. To have shalom means we are in a right relationship in all directions.

The Gospel here is always that Christ makes this peace. He slays the hostility. This is not our doing. We often assume that conflict means I need to fix it. But the good news here is that Jesus is the peace. He is the one who fixes it. Again, we have to stress this, we are not in control of this solution. But we can be part of it. We cannot own it, however. Jesus will have to do that. Paul may never have thought that Sosthenes would become a brother, but he could hope for it.

Paul is very clear – the peace comes through the blood, the broken body of Christ. It is a cross thing. It unites all of us. There is no human being, no matter how sinful, for whom Jesus did not die. That simply slays the hatred. I can look at anyone and see first and foremost a person for whom Jesus died.