

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 23 (Proper 16)

Today we return, after a three week feast in John's sixth chapter, to the semi-continuous reading of Mark. We resume in chapter 7. As Mark continues, the preacher will want to be aware of the building tension in Mark. The stress between Jesus and the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees continues to grow more intense as the Gospel progresses. Of course this is Mark's depiction of the immediate cause of the crucifixion. He is telling a story, after all, and that building tension between Jesus and those who will eventually kill him is important. But the tension between the Jewish leaders and the Christ is also an occasion for him to paint the picture of Christ and his people opposed by all sorts of enemies, including the persecutors of the Roman Christians in the first century, the empire itself. Of course Mark will see behind all of this the infernal hand of our great enemy, Satan.

We have already seen a little of this. Do you remember that very important scene where Jesus met the demoniac in Genesareth? Remember that all this happened in Aramaic, not the Greek in which Mark writes, so Mark (or Peter his source) is translating this. The Demons call themselves "legion." Of course that is not a word in Aramaic. In Aramaic the demons probably said something like "many." But "legion" it is a loaded word in Greek, it is the word for the principal formation of soldiers in the Roman army. Is Mark, by choosing this particular translation of "many" making a deliberate statement here about the enemies of Jesus people in the first century? Is it an accident that they are cast into a herd of pigs and that these poor creatures then cast themselves into the sea? Is Mark in that scene saying something about the men who are carting off the Christians to prison and torture and martyrdom? Does Mark really suggest that they are pigs? Does he mean that the legionaries are demonic? Does he predict their chaotic and grisly end? Or is this more like the member of some racial minority in our cities referring the police as "pigs?" I think it is the former and not the latter.

As you read the conflict with the Pharisees, see this as more than simply an historical record of the conflict which Jesus faced, it is the conflict which Jesus continues to face through us. When he confronts Saul on the road to Damascus, he asks "Why do you persecute me?" Notice he does not say "why do you persecute my people?" When Saul imprisons the Christians of Jerusalem, it is Jesus whom he is imprisoning. This is incarnational theology, and hence also sacramental theology at work. It is essential to the reading of the NT but be aware that our culture has conditioned us to read these events through an historical lens which only asks whether this happened in the past. Some say it is just a fable, others, most LCMS folks included, say of course it happened. But both groups can argue about the historicity and miss the real point Mark is making here. It is not a past event we are really talking about but a filter or lens by which we understand the present. When you see Jesus in conflict, expect also see that this is also about the people of God, the Christian people, the people alive today. Mark sees that the Jesus of whom he speaks is actively and truly present in the people of God right now. Theologically speaking, this

is the nation of Israel/the Church reduced to One in Christ. He is the embodiment of the OT and the NT people.

Today we specifically see Jesus in conflict with the teachers of the Law over the issue of traditions and the “spirit” of the Torah which they violate with their many rules. This is not a new conflict, Isaiah railed against this sort of mentality in his day. It is not an old conflict either. LCMS Lutherans also may find themselves engaged in meaningless conflict over what color the new advent candles will be once in a while. At the meetings voices are raised, and feelings hurt, and over what? We so easily lose sight of what is really important, raising some human tradition over the salvation of people. I think it is important that Jesus built no buildings, he established only Baptism, Forgiveness/Absolution, and Eucharist as rites, and he simply said go make disciples, preach, teach, baptize. He gave very few instructions about how to go about fulfilling those directives. The Bible gives no clear guidance on ordination or church governance or many of the things we often find so important that we are willing to go to the extent of excluding someone from the fellowship. Granted, it does say some things about making and keeping promises, which all those who would stand before the people of God and preach are asked to make.

Who is the enemy here? Is it like that old saying: “We have found the enemy, and he is us.” (Grammatically incorrect, but permissible because of the expectation of “ours” at the end of the phrase.) Is this a day when we will remember that Christ has conquered our enemies of death, Satan, and our own sinful flesh? We dare not just preach a sermon about long ago. It needs to be a sermon about right now.

The present might just rise up and smack the preacher today. Paul speaks of marriage and, when addressing the wives of his congregation, he uses the dreaded word, “Submit.” In an age of #MeToo movements, we need to ask whether that is a useful term for preaching. If it is, how do we do that? Our culture has turned this word so negative that we may not be able to use it. Is that so? It is worth noting that the verb does not actually occur in verse 22. It only appears in verse 21, but that carries over into 22. Any preaching which doesn’t back up to verse 21 will simply fail. The mutual submission makes this submissive posture into something other than what militant feminism is reacting against. The many who are in reactionary mode today are reacting against power based and abusive relationships. We are opposed to those relationships as well. Men who think it is their right to grope women or say offensive things to women are not OK in any Christian’s ethical system. Abusive husbands are not given a license here nor are women being told to take it from such husbands. Mutual submission means that no one is lording it over the other and if you do, you are in a different sort of relationship than the one Paul is talking about.

A radical feminist will not likely be able to hear this sermon. But a woman who has been part of the reaction to militant feminism will likely appreciate someone who articulates this way to

understand the word. The good preacher simply must be aware of his congregation. No substitute for that.

Culturally this is very interesting. In the Latino community this word submit is viewed very differently, for example, especially in rural communities. I once had a woman in a NT class when we talked about this verse who spoke of her Micronesian upbringing in which women were not allowed to stand in the presence of men in the home. They had to crawl until out of a line of sight. Then they could stand or walk. She thought this was not only normal/OK, she was shocked by the way women treated men in western culture and thought it was wrong. That was a very interesting discussion.

We also might want to talk about the sacramental nature of marriage. We would distinguish this from the Roman Catholic Sacrament of Marriage. Marriage is sacramental, a place where Christ shows up in our lives to love and support us. When we are forgiven, of course, that is absolution. My wife might absolve me. But marriage is an occasion for Jesus to be present in my life, physically and emotionally and relationally. I can be that presence of Christ to my spouse and that spouse to me. This is very different than the usual definition that people normally have. For most folks marriage is a voluntary, contractual arrangement between two willing parties. It has tax advantages and a peculiar standing before the law. To say that marriage is sacramental is to recognize what Paul is talking about in the Epistle reading today when he compares it to the relationship of Christ to the Church. It is a holy thing. To love my spouse is not just a therapeutically good thing for me and her, but is a manifestation of Christ in the world. To come back to the discussion of the prior paragraph, the abusive or power-based relationship which is masquerading as a marriage is a sacrilege, a violation of something which is far more holy than simply a contractual obligation gone awry.

Collect of the Day

Almighty and merciful God, defend Your Church from all false teaching and error that Your faithful people may confess You to be the only true God and rejoice in your good gifts of life and salvation; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God is powerful – all powerful and yet is merciful. Mercy is an act which must be shown from above. One cannot have mercy on a peer. One must be more powerful, or on a higher moral plane, or something like that in order to show mercy to someone else. I think too often we confuse mercy with understanding. I can understand a peer's behavior. A slave does not show mercy to a master, but a master may show mercy to a slave. Likewise the accused cannot have mercy on the judge but it is the judge who has mercy on the accused. Even there, releasing an innocent person is not mercy, but is justice. Mercy is the judge not condemning the guilty person. Likewise, if I am wealthy and encounter a poor man, I can have mercy on him with a gift or assistance. But the poor man can only have mercy on me from a perspective of being morally

superior if I need his forgiveness. Being almighty, God can show mercy to anyone because everyone is below him.

We ask him to defend the Church from all false teaching and error. But what is false teaching and error? It really all and always boils down to the same thing – the first commandment. Every heresy, every error, eventually leads to that simply statement that God is our God and we are his people and no one else should occupy that place in our life. He sets the agenda, he receives the worship; his is the voice to which we hearken. Consider the understanding articulated above about marriage being a sacramental union. Is that a place where false teaching has crept into the fellowship of too many Christians? Is it keeping us from rejoicing in and enjoying the true gifts of life and salvation?

We need God to defend that truth for us, we are too apt to chase after false gods, whether it is the idolatry of thinking only of myself or the idolatry of worshipping some God which heretical doctrine has offered me. His defense of that truth secures our confession of God's place and significance as the only true God and that confession leads then to the joy of life and salvation.

Today we will ponder just what sort of idols we might find in our lives. Baal has not been much of a viable option for some time, at least not since the fall of Jerusalem. The Roman and Greek Gods of Olympus are little more than characters we read about in old and dusty books, not the living presence which so filled the lives of ancient people. The 20th century narrative suggested that the Enlightenment has slain all the gods. That is really what Nietzsche was talking about when he said "God is dead." He was not talking about an ontological truth but the fact that for most westerners, God simply doesn't matter much. But ignoring God does not make one into a non-idolater, as if one could be "a-religious." That is actually part of the enlightenment mythology which has sought to replace Christianity.

Recently, however, we have seen a genuine uptick in the interest in things divine. Neil Gaiman's "American Gods" which is now a TV series as well, suggested that the Enlightenment certainties were not actually so certain. Because this renewed interest or openness to things which lie outside the Enlightenment's epistemological sandbox has not been in our preferred language and idiom, Christianity has largely done a poor job of capturing that interest. The reductive materialism which spawned so much death in the 20th century has left many folks hungry for something which transcends the mundane. The Harry Potter novels, Zombies, Vampires, Marvel superhero movies, and much more. We are hungry for something that is bigger than this life. Christians have largely stood on the side of that movement and are rarely perceived as a viable place to find that larger element for life. Do we need to change that?

For the folks in our pews who are listening to our sermons, however, our idols are much more subtle in their action. They are most effective when they insist that serving them is to serve God. I can worship my hymnal this way or my praise band when I disdain or ridicule the worship of another in the name of Jesus. I can hold up ordination or lay presidency as the only way that God can be properly worshipped, when in fact God has said very little about this. I can elevate

the traditions of men over the word of God, and so I can bend my knee to an idol of subversive and subtle power. This power is subversive because it overturns the very nature of God's kingdom. It is subtle because it masks itself under piety and correct doctrine.

The Law's message today will be pointed, which means the Gospel must be pointed as well. The Gospel reading is not on the face of it the scene of much Gospel, but the prayer reminds us that God is defending us from error and on his guidance we must rely. Taking a step back from the text itself, we see Jesus in a fight which will result in his own death, and the salvation of the world. The good news is that this is Jesus' fight much more than it is my fight.

Readings

Isaiah 29:11-19 *I have again offered up a little context for these verses which I think is important for reading them authentically and honestly.*

Astonish yourselves and be astonished;

blind yourselves and be blind!

Be drunk, but not with wine;

stagger, but not with strong drink!

¹⁰ *For the LORD has poured out upon you*

a spirit of deep sleep,

and has closed your eyes (the prophets),

and covered your heads (the seers).

¹¹ And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, "Read this," he says, "I cannot, for it is sealed." ¹² And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, "Read this," he says, "I cannot read."

¹³ And the Lord said:

"Because this people draw near with their mouth

and honor me with their lips,

while their hearts are far from me,

and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,

¹⁴ therefore, behold, I will again

do wonderful things with this people,

with wonder upon wonder;

and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,

and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden."

¹⁵ Ah, you who hide deep from the LORD your counsel,

whose deeds are in the dark,

and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"

¹⁶ You turn things upside down!

Shall the potter be regarded as the clay,

that the thing made should say of its maker,
“He did not make me”;
or the thing formed say of him who formed it,
“He has no understanding”?

¹⁷ Is it not yet a very little while
until Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest?

¹⁸ In that day the deaf shall hear
the words of a book,
and out of their gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind shall see.

¹⁹ The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD,
and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.

²⁰ *For the ruthless shall come to nothing
and the scoffer cease,
and all who watch to do evil shall be cut off,*

²¹ *who by a word make a man out to be an offender,
and lay a snare for him who reproves in the gate,
and with an empty plea turn aside him who is in the right.*

²² *Therefore thus says the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob:*

*“Jacob shall no more be ashamed,
no more shall his face grow pale.*

²³ *For when he sees his children,
the work of my hands, in his midst,
they will sanctify my name;*

*they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.*

²⁴ *And those who go astray in spirit will come to understanding,
and those who murmur will accept instruction.”*

This lesson begins and ends in a rather odd place. It is cut out of a longer section of Isaiah in which he is discussing a great calamity that befalls the people as a judgment of God. I have included this context for us, but pay attention especially to the following verses just because they seem to carry forward the thought. We read these verses on Sunday because they connect so well with the Gospel reading in which Jesus confronts the Pharisees about the pharisaical food regulations. Here in Isaiah, God is frustrated with his people. The omission of the earlier and later material masks the depth of God’s frustration and his concern. He says it is like giving them a book, they either won’t open it or they can’t read it. They have the stuff, the information is right there in front of them, but it does no good. These Israelites are blind, they are deaf, and

they are just not on the same wave length. Surrounded by the love of God and his gracious teaching (Torah) they have simply not heeded it.

But this is not for a lack of externals. They draw near to God, they are in church, they are visiting the temple, praying and making their vows, but their hearts are far from God. One might be tempted, and perhaps justified to see this as a difference between an external religious practice and a genuine faith of the heart. But there is a danger in this that we would throw the babe out with the bath water. It is not that God doesn't want them to do the externals, what he doesn't want is an external that is not in synch with the internal. Best is when the externals are in fact reflecting what is in the heart. In an effort to avoid mindless liturgy and ritual, which I don't like either, some have foregone all ritual and liturgy, or at least tried to. But this is not really listening to what God is saying here and elsewhere. What is more, if you have ever tried this, it soon devolves into another sort of liturgy, one which is rarely as good as the liturgy which was abandoned. Non-liturgical congregations usually only sing about 50-60 songs, they simply have a different liturgy and it is often much less fulsome than the liturgy of the historical Christian Church. I have worshipped in many congregations, most of which have had a praise service, but I think I have not sung more than about score of different songs. In truth, the greatest musical diversity I found was in a pair of congregations which were still using TLH and singing page five and fifteen.

I do not say this to suggest that we ought return to TLH, but what I mean is that there are a number of ways in which this very issue can arise. Just because we have a power point slide show and someone with a drum set up front does not mean that we have eluded the emptiness of rote and the unthinking recitation of a liturgy which has not connected with our hearts. Anyone can suffer from this, whether you are singing the Kyrie for 500th time or "Come, Now is the Time for Worship" for the 500th time.

God promises to take action, and here is graciousness on God's part, but it is also a frightening grace. He will force open their eyes and pry open their ears so they shall hear the words of a book. God will do wonders among them and signs before them, just as he did of old. Remember that Isaiah is living some centuries after the Exodus and the miracles of manna and crossing the Red Sea.

The wisdom of the wise shall perish. This is probably the very verse that Paul has in mind when he writes the first chapter of his letter to the Corinthians. The people try to hide their counsels from the Lord, they would do things in secret, away from him who knows all things. Their wisdom is foolishness, it does not reflect reality. In their world the potter and the clay have turned about, with the clay making the potter. As a student of the history of science and faith and the relationship between them, I cannot think of a more stinging indictment of current academic culture. It was a Lutheran named Feuerbach who is credited with postulating that God is just a form of wish-fulfillment. There is no God out there, but our psyche has created him and projected onto him all our needs so he becomes the answer to our most difficult questions. But,

according to Feuerbach, there is no one out there really answering all these prayers we utter. At least that is what Feuerbach and a number of other scholars have asserted. This is not a new idea, one can read in Theogenes, a pre-Socratic poet who is roughly the contemporary of Isaiah, much the same sentiment.

But this is foolishness, and science really has not found an answer to the proof of God from first cause. So it conveniently ignores it. We have made a god which we can control and define and own, but which surely no one would actually worship. Isaiah declares that God will answer this foolishness and every eye will see and every knee will bow, as Paul declares in Philippians 2.

In Isaiah's vision the world is turned upside down. Lebanon's mountains are turned into a fruitful field, and the fruitful plains become forests. It is a little like Colorado become the grain belt and Iowa thick with giant fir trees and cedars. In this upside down world the deaf hear, the blind see, the meek are the winners and the poor are the ones exulting in the Lord. That sounds like Jesus and his ministry, and I would bet the Gospel writers have this passage in mind as they tell the story of Jesus and make sure we know about the blind seeing and the deaf hearing and the poor who exult in God at the feeding of the five thousand.

There is more to remember here. The folks in exile in Babylon read this and got very excited about a new Moses arising and leading them home. They were then very disappointed when Cyrus the Great simply said they could all go home. The policy has changed and we are no longer doing the exile thing for anyone. There was no smiting the enemy with plagues, no dramatic crossing the Red Sea this time. They loaded up wagons and made a long dusty journey to the ruined walls of their former capitol. They slowly rebuilt the temple and the walls, but they needed building permits, there was lots of red tape, and they did not enjoy it at all. The stories of Nehemiah, Esther, and Ezra really are about telling the post-exilic people that God was also acting through people like Esther, Nehemiah and Ezra. It did not look just like Moses and Aaron, but it was the same God. I always tell my OT classes that the exiled people of God were looking for Moses but got Martha Stewart as Esther saves the people from another genocide by throwing dinner parties.

The overtly miraculous would largely have to wait for the day that Jesus burst on the scene and started raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, calming the storms, and opening the eyes of the blind. We too need to remember that God fulfills his promises in unexpected ways, rarely the same way twice.

Psalm 14

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."

They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds,
there is none who does good.

- ² The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man,
to see if there are any who understand,
who seek after God.
- ³ They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt;
there is none who does good,
not even one.
- ⁴ Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers
who eat up my people as they eat bread
and do not call upon the LORD?
- ⁵ There they are in great terror,
for God is with the generation of the righteous.
- ⁶ You would shame the plans of the poor,
but the LORD is his refuge.
- ⁷ Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!
When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people,
let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad.

This psalm also is filled with verses which the New Testament is picking up. Paul quotes verse 3 in his famous indictment of humanity in Romans 3. The image of the rich devouring the poor like a loaf of bread is horrifying and weirdly accurate.

The hope is only found in verse 7. God comes. He is the solution to the problems we face, not a politician, not a new program, not a new initiative from Synodical headquarters, or another round of theological purges to get the heretics out. Salvation comes from God, not Synodical conventions or state houses. But when will we start believing that?

Ephesians 5:22-33

¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,
¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, ²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh,

but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church,³⁰ because we are members of his body.³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

I have included the sentence which precedes this reading and I think it is really important to do so. Too many of our hearers on Sunday morning will be unable to hear Paul’s admonition to the women of his day to submit without being offended and therefore be unable to hear the rest of the text. Paul exhorts us to submit to one another. We are to be filled with the Spirit of God who changes us. Unfortunately for the current context, Paul does not use the submit word for the husband’s role, but he uses the word love which has been so radically poisoned by our culture. The husband is supposed to love as Christ loved the Church and that involved dying for it on a cross, a far more radical form of submission. All this is part of the mutual submission of the Christian to one another. As Paul unpacks this in the various vocations of life, he will speak of slaves and parents and children.

Paul starts with the basic building block of society, marriage. Our culture has defined marriage with a sociological, legal definition. Paul is speaking of an act of God here. We understand that marriage is made by will of the participants who say “I do” to the vows and idea of marriage. But the Bible regularly sees marriage as an act of God. It is always interesting to me that marriage was the one institution of our lives that was intended for us before the fall into sin. God institutes marriage in Genesis 2. Yes, marriage is poisoned by sin and often a place where Satan works great evil in the lives of people, but marriage is also part of God’s plan. No other institutions we see have such a lineage. Even the church is surely part of God’s answer to sin and thus must be a post-fall creation. Of course things like schools and hospitals and government and fire stations, and the like are all part of the world after the fall. But marriage, though it has been affected by Sin, is part of the perfect creation too. It is therefore the image of something perfect, the relationship which Christ has established with his church. It is this fellowship which also is part of the pre-fall state. It was good for the man not to be alone. Yes, that would involve marriage but also the community of people whom Adam and Eve were to produce and who were to fill the earth. In a day and age when the world wants to redefine marriage to mean something else, the preacher has an opportunity to bear witness to what God has said. Don’t bash the others here. Speak of what God has in mind.

It is also critical to remember that Paul is speaking of a loving relationship, not a power relationship. The husband’s love described in the second paragraph is also under the general rubric of “submit to one another...” The woman who recoils at the admonition to submit to the husband may well be doing so because she or people whom she loves have been abused and dreadfully hurt by abusive husbands who have exercised power and sinful dominion. The preacher needs to be very careful to delineate those two things. Paul is not advocating that

women in abusive relationships should submissively “take it” because that is their role. Paul is speaking of a love relationship here in which the husband is caring for the wife, to the point of dying for her. In that context submission is hardly fearsome and demeaning. It is an act of love, never fear.

Paul says a couple of odd things here which should perhaps give us some pause before we rashly apply this text to our lives, however. “No one ever hated his own body.” That simply is not true, whether we are talking about some teenage girl who is starving herself to death in an effort to look like a supermodel, the suicide who jumped off the local bridge, or a medieval flagellant who whipped himself bloody as he walked from village to village, there have been lots of people who have hated their own bodies. It is also important that at the end of this, Paul seems to recognize that he has lapsed into a discussion of the church and Christ, and exactly where the division needs to be made is not entirely clear.

But Paul’s words do lend themselves to a really good sacramental discussion which too often is neglected here. The Church is presented pure and without spot, cleansed by water and word. That’s baptism! And then the discussion of the two becoming one flesh could surely be taken to mean that we are one flesh with Christ, and that could also be a sacramental discussion of the Lord’s Supper.

Mark 7:1-13

Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, ² they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, ⁴ and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) ⁵ And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶ And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

“This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
⁷ in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’

⁸ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

⁹ And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)— ¹² then you no

longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

¹⁴ *And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand:*

¹⁵ *There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.”*

Alas, this is one of the places that our translation fails us. The word in verse 4 in which they translate “wash” in the discussion of couches and copper vessels is actually “baptizo.” This has long been a stock argument against those who insist on an immersion baptism over against the sprinkling baptism of most Lutheran churches (a tradition which surely arose in the rather frigid regions of northern Europe where a full immersion might have been somewhat dangerous for about half the year.)

But what am I doing? Am I not much more concerned with the traditions of men in this than I am listening to God? God has made great promises in the waters of baptism and I am fighting about how to apply the water. This is really easy to do!

Of course this is handwashing and the CDC is adamant that this is the way we will defeat the flu this fall and winter and thus ensure that no one dies this year (note sarcasm). This is not what Jesus is talking about. Washing your hands is a good thing, but when someone says that God doesn't love you as much as he does the guy who has properly washed, then Jesus has a problem with it, as should we. When the member of the Church of God (Anderson, IN) tells you that your Lutheran baptism is not effective since it was a sprinkling done when you were an infant, just remember that these guys almost split 100 years ago over the issue of whether men were allowed to wear neckties. God loves quarrelsome Christians too.

Jesus takes the discussion to the very center of the covenant: the Ten Commandments. They are arguing about the minutiae of handwashing, something that is not anywhere close to the heart of the Torah, and Jesus points out that they have broken the most basic of societal commandments. They have encouraged people to fail in the act of honoring their parents. Even worse, the motive is money. If the person has put the cash into a trust fund for the Church, then it is alright that they have not taken care of their parents. I once was part of a capital campaign that received a gift of \$300,000. But what we did not know was that this was a terrible gift. The man was angry at his son and this was the son's portion of the inheritance. This was not so much a gift as a punitive statement to a disobedient son. To this day, I am convinced that the building we built with that money cost \$300,000 more than it should have otherwise.

Like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, it is so easy for us to lose sight of the really important things. We do this all the time. How many fights at voters meetings or between spouses, or inside of families are not about things that really don't matter? They matter, but not so much that we should be willing to break relationship and harm the other over it. One very important message to take out of this is a message of priorities, a message which is so often forgotten. God loves

people, they are his treasures, they are his delights. Don't hurt them, don't take from them, don't abuse them, and don't use them, because they are his creation and his beloved. The self-submissive relationship of which Paul speaks in the Epistle lesson is really the same thing that is behind what Jesus talks about today. The building is not so important, the institution, the Synod, the Seminary, the rest of the stuff we think is important, all pales when we compare it to God's love for his people and what that makes of them.

It really is about the people. We must even submit something so essential as the Lord's Supper, Worship, Baptism, etc, to the love of God for people. If we use these things in a way that does not love those people, all our rectitude is worthless and offensive to God. Like the Pharisees we have become "terribly right." The sacraments are God's great expressions of love for people – they are Gospel made touchable, testable, and audible. Do not turn them into Law! It really is about the people. God has come into the flesh of humanity, he has established the Church, he has given the sacraments and preaching and teaching and all the stuff we do because he cares for people, not because he wanted to establish a sacrament, a church, a doctrine, or anything else. He did this because he loved people.

There really is a second message that fits in here. Jesus calls us back today to remember that God stands at the middle of our universe, and not ourselves. He defines us, our ministry, our life itself. He calls us back to let God set priorities, not our own agenda of self-interest. He calls us to the humility which is manifested in obedient love and service to one another.

But Mark has a third message in here, a macro message from the whole book. He is also speaking of matters of cosmic significance. Jesus is in conflict with these Pharisees. By the end of his short Gospel the one perfect man will be killed and raised again to life. His death will be wrought by the very men who wrangle against him in this passage, because of the answers that Jesus gives here. Oddly, Jesus gets the priorities right in both word and deed so that in love for neighbor which transcends our understanding, will die even for these stubborn Pharisees who confront him today. It is just this issue, this re-interpretation of Torah which will put him on the cross, the cross where Jesus' death will save the world.

For the readers of Mark who were also experiencing a conflict as they were being persecuted, Mark puts their experience into a special context. They are one with Jesus. God's modus operandi, his method, is to work in just this sort of conflict. Remember this is not God's failure, this is God's method. It hurts, it is no fun, but then again, neither was the cross for Jesus. He did not want to do that either. But he did, because he made a sacrifice which saved the world. We too do not shrink back from the persecutions and difficulties which the world throws at us because we know that in just this sort of thing God works his salvation. We see our Lord Jesus facing the same sort of unreasonable and difficult people who eventually killed him. I do not therefore seek suffering, but I suffer in hope. (See Romans 5.) In the darkest days the light of Christ shines brightest. The martyrs are the seeds of the Church. There are many more such phrases which pithily speak this truth.

Law

1. God's ways are not my ways and his thoughts are not my thoughts. They are inaccessible to my puny human intelligence. I am naturally an enemy of God and his love.
2. Having been shown God's love, I am not freed entirely of my old ways of thinking; in fact they can come to dominate my life. My human power-hungry nature wants to set the agenda of life and even when I call it serving God I can make an idol of even something like worship or church, thinking that my mission is to preserve a building or a style or denomination, when God is really interested in the people.
3. The result of this old man asserting himself in my life and the life of the Christian community is disastrous. The church is a particularly fruitful field for the old man to play his games. We fight about things that are not important, we lose sight of the mission of God to save the world from Sin, Death, and Devil and think that we are serving God by hurting people in the conflicts which we wage.
4. It also shows up in terrible ways in my own home. The people I hurt the most are often the people who are closest to me. The very act of being a family exposes us, makes us especially vulnerable to the hurtful words and deeds of one another.
5. We set up false rules and human traditions which distract people from the real message of Christ's love for the world. (I have just finished teaching a group of NT students who were flabbergasted by what they read in the NT. Most of them had never opened it and were amazed to find the message of love that was in there – I find that very sad that they grew in communities filled with Churches but they never heard that message)
6. Our fight is not only against our own sinful flesh, however, it is against a much more personal and deeper evil. But Satan no longer uses Roman legions to frighten us away from Christ, he has found a much more effective tool inside the body of believers. Sowing the seeds of dissension and conflict he has much more effectively silenced the Church than any arena full of lions was ever able to do.

Gospel

1. God has not only spoken through the prophets, but now he has himself come into the flesh of sinful humanity. He has bridged the great gulf between the rebellious creation and the perfect God which we could not bridge.
2. He has called sinners to be the emissaries of his love, because broken people can speak to other broken people and offer an invitation to believe which is resistible. It is good that we are such as we are. God knows that and this is just why Christ has died.
3. God does not leave us as we were in our sin, but has begun a good work which he brings closer to completion all the time. He has begun to renew our mind, our inner being. It is

not impossible for us to see the world with God's eyes, because he has gifted us with his sight, his love. That means we can treat our neighbor differently.

4. A dismal track record is often the occasion for a glorious renewal. There is no secret here, no special program or technique, just love for people. With that love, the programs work, without it, the programs fail. Only God can give it, and he has given it in baptismal water, in Word, and Sacrament, in community, the trick is that we see that it is a gift to be given.
5. God loves my family, he has united himself to this world and calls it his bride. There is no sin I or my loved one has committed which is bigger than the love of Jesus. He makes the home a place where his Christian people can love one another best of all.
6. Our enemy does not understand this love, he cannot fathom it, and that is his critical weakness. He only thinks in terms of power. (If you want a really interesting illustration of this, watch the final scene of Harry Potter V, the Order of the Phoenix in which Voldemort possesses Harry. It is right at the end of the movie.) God's love is much deeper and infinitely more powerful. (Another illustration might be the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe in which Aslan defeats the witch by sacrificing himself because she does not know the "deeper magic" of the Emperor beyond the sea.)

Sermon Ideas

1. A fine way... (That God would call the hearer to repent of idolatrous, self-serving pride and humbly listen to the divine agenda for life – the love of God's precious people over all else.)

Jesus sarcastically says that the Jews of his day have a fine way of keeping the commands of God. They have substituted the rules of men for the commandments of God and this has twisted something healthy and good into something which leaves little old ladies and old men without the support they desperately need in their autumn years. But before we look down on the sins of Jesus' opponents, perhaps we would do well to look at our own selves for a moment. What exactly is a Lutheran? Is it a passionately evangelistic and people focused follower of Jesus who is known for his or her love and service? Or is a Lutheran someone who worships a certain way, has a thing for green Jell-O at potlucks, or who comes from a certain ethnic group? Such things are relatively innocuous, but what if a Lutheran is known in the community as a person who fights about obscure articles of the Augsburg Confession, sees red whenever someone mentions decision theology, and participates in what amounts to a funeral club, burying each other when we die but not really caring about anything else outside their congregation's walls? Would your community really mourn the loss of your parish if it were to close up today? Who would notice?

The reality is that our congregation as a whole and each of us individually fall somewhere between those extremes. On one end we hear Jesus' scathing sarcasm "A fine way to show your Christianity..." I have always thought it odd, for instance, that we demonstrate our love for Jesus by ignoring his mother, as if God knows how much we love him because we loudly assert that we are not Catholic. This despite Mary's Spirit-inspired words in Luke 1 that all generations will call her blessed. God sees the things which we have done, all of them, and many of them he hates and in truth he wants us to quit. Yes, this conflict in which Jesus engaged that day was part of leading up to his death on a cross, but you also have to understand that he really did care about the little old ladies and the aged fathers who were destitute because they continued this practice of Corban.

On the other end of the extreme we must be careful to note that we do not find the reward of heaven, but we do find the pleasure of God. Heaven is a gift, never earned. A penitent murderer who finally believes on his deathbed gets the same heaven I get, the same blessed and perfect relationship with God. But the faithful Christian who has followed Jesus as a disciple does get the joy of hearing God's delight in the good of their life, even as God forgives the sin. I rather get the picture here of sitting down on a big couch with God and watching a really detailed movie of your whole life. I would assume that he will spring for the beer in this. The sins are there and at each one God says, "I died for that." But there are also a lot of good things too, moments when the life of Christ shone in your life. When those show up, God says, "I saw that, that was great!" I could look forward to those moments and the chance to hear those words. Not because I am more loved because of them, but just to hear them.

As preachers we proclaim the favor of God in Christ. This is a beautiful and free gift; never earned, graciously given in Christ on the cross, the cross he is working toward with this very exchange. But with that favor comes the opportunity to really please God with our lives. This is not new for us, we heard last summer when Paul said to the Romans: The obedience that comes from Faith. There are moments when God looks at our lives and because the sins have been removed, he now can see the inkling of what he created us to be in the first place, his precious and loving children. This is not some game in which we have to score better than most. It is much more like a little child with furrowed brow carefully making a mother's day card in school. His whole delight is that when she opens that card, his mom will smile and say what a good and beautiful card it really is. On the open market, the art won't bring much, but in the marketplace of the mother's heart, it is priceless. God has given us that opportunity to please him with the lives we live, as individuals and as a congregation – Here I would talk about some of the really good things that have happened in your parish in the last year or so. Jesus really does care about the things we do, when we love each other, when we love this community, when we serve his children, and when we visit that old woman in the nursing home and pray

for her in church. Jesus sees all that, he cares for all that, he hates the fighting and the strife that sometimes plagues us, and he really loves it when we forgive and love and care.

The preacher will want to import the OT lesson on this one too, as God promises to turn the world upside down for Isaiah's hearers. They don't get it, we don't get it very well. There are lots of places where my congregation has failed in this regard, but the solution to that problem does not lie in our strength, but in God turning the world upside down! That makes sure that it fits just right! That is what happened to a crabby old Pharisee named Saul on a road to Damascus and that is what happened to all of us in our baptism. God has been turning the world upside down ever since the resurrection flipped the world on its head for the disciples. As Isaiah said, mountainous Lebanon becomes a fruited plain and Iowa gets logged. (paraphrase according to Phil)

2. Husbands, Love Your Wives (Epistle: That the Holy Spirit would empower us to lead chaste and decent lives and each one love and honor his/her spouse.)

We live in a #MeToo moment of history. The narrative is pretty straightforward here – after years and years of silently putting up with abusive words and actions by men, women are finally standing up and saying something. I don't want to negate that narrative. My own daughter carries framing nails in her pocket when she rides the bus because she has had run-ins with "creepers." She attends college in Saint Louis and was trying meet my younger brother, her uncle, in Forest Park and was harassed across an open field by foul-mouthed men shouting sexually suggestive and explicit taunts at her. There is too much in the MeToo Movement's angry words that is true. We dare not deny it.

As a father listening to his daughter tearfully recount the story of Forest Park from half a continent away, I will admit that I wanted nothing more than for some divine retribution to fall on certain heads at that moment. But God's ways are not my ways, and the world is better for it. In the days of the Roman Empire it was not better; in fact, it was worse. Paul's words to the Ephesians describing marriage in this text were a direct and confrontational assault on a culture which saw every human relationship through a lens of power and submission to power. Husbands were not only allowed to beat their wives, they were supposed to. Daughters were kept at home and safely within the walls of the house because it was not safe on the streets for them. Slaves were wholly owned by masters, including sexually. Paul imagines a very different world in this passage and calls on men and women to live lives of mutual respect, love, and care which was wholly opposite to the Roman understanding of power and submission.

Yes, he speaks of submission but he hijacks that word and makes it wholly other with the words we focus on today – the love of husbands for those wives. There is a real submission in marriage, a mutual submission that beautiful, safe, and loving. This was

radical and subversive in a way. I want this sermon to be likewise radical and subversive. We know that many of the earliest converts to Christianity were women, frequently wealthy women who opened their homes to the newly planted Christian communities. Was this a sort of first century MeToo movement? Were they hearing someone speak of them in a radically different way than the Roman culture spoke of them – no longer as weaker and therefore inferior, but as precious and beloved? I think so.

I wish I could say that Christian marriages have always worked like Paul describes. But they have not. The preacher who stands before a congregation in any parish will confront a body of people who have frequently struggled in marriages which are anything but measuring up to Paul's ideal. There will be women who have been abused by their husbands and there will be husbands who have abused. There will be divorcees and those who are seriously considering it as they settle into to the pew. Among those seated there will be many who have not lived up to this ideal of husband that Paul describes, so loving that life itself is forfeit for the spouse. Too many will have been conditioned by locker-room language and culturally normative practices which wink at bad boy behaviors.

It is time to call sin what it is here. A Christian does not say those things or do those things. That is of the other, old, and dead (Eph 2:1-3) way of life from which we have been raised. Of course preachers call sins sin so they may forgive them. Jesus was always dinged for hanging around with the wrong people and we should not be surprised if our words dredge up some things from the sludge that lies at the bottom of all human hearts. Make a little time in your calendar next week to meet with some folks.

But the sermon needs to proclaim another kingdom, reign, rule, and reality for our people to see and hear. The Jesus who gave his life for this world gives that same life into us. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me! (Galatians 2:20) The preacher may want to remember the prayer Paul prayed for the Ephesian hearers in the opening verses of this Epistle. It was not that they were there, but Paul was praying them and us there.

This sermon takes note that the world is ripe at this time and place to hear a message of sexual chastity and respectful relationship but also needs to note that we want have our cake and to eat it too. The same voices that scream about bad behavior shrilly decry any attempt to raise the issue of modesty as a repression of natural urges. We will need to call into question a world which saturates our media and advertising with increasingly sexually explicit imagery and language. What do we expect to happen when we pull the lid off of that; when there are no boundaries to what we put before people? Are we feeding a beast? Time to practice some good hygiene when it comes to viewing and listening habits? But this is not about them it is about us and that is where the radical nature of this will have to begin. We cannot change the world until we are changed.

3. Submit to one another out of Love (That the hearer would receive the gift of family from God, delighting in his love expressed through these relationships)

Roman families at the time of Paul might make an interesting contrast. Augustine talks about this in the “City of God.” Men were the powerful ones here. Women, because they were physically weaker, were often put down and abused. Remember the Micronesian family which my student described earlier in these notes. Children who were unwanted would be exposed and left to die. Slaves who disobeyed or rebelled against their master were executed, usually by crucifixion. This was all legal. Paul is contrasting a very different picture of what marriage should like. The fact that contemporary culture wants to adopt this Christian idea of marriage and apply it to relationships outside what we consider acceptable is both a problem and a huge compliment to the effect of Christianity on culture. No homosexual in the first century would have wanted to be married unless that person was really looking to be abused.

The preacher will also want to address the myth that women in Christian marriage are subjugated. Paul is speaking of mutual submission, not a one side submission. Putting the other person first sounds really risky until the other person is doing the same thing for you.

This sermon proclaims a much neglected and important topic that just happens to show up in the Epistle and Gospel readings today. Both Paul and Jesus speak about families, and both of them give us to understand that families are important to God and occasions where his gracious love is expressed. Modern mankind often think that we make families and that we establish marriages. But the texts are clear. This is God’s work. He makes them. This is his doing and we can see his handiwork in them.

Jesus speaks of people today who act as if the family was way down on the list of priorities, somewhere below offerings, church attendance, and serving on the Altar Guild. But God sees that as being upside down. In truth, God says that in our spouse we see an act of Christ and a picture of his love for this world as that person loves me despite myself. In the Lord’s Prayer we are invited to call God “Father” because fathers are a very important picture of the love of God. Jesus likens himself to a bride groom and us to the bride to say just how much he loves us, and how excited he is to bring us to that great wedding feast called heaven. He calls us children so we would know what it means that he loves us.

All this gives us occasion to say that our families are in fact precious to Jesus, they are important to him. Jesus scolds the Jews of his day for neglecting their duty to parents, even if it meant that they did not fulfill some vow to the church. Paul speaks of a more excellent way, the way of mutual submission to one another, a relationship which puts the other first.

Now this passage has been the source of much misunderstanding and angst on the part of some people. Too often battered women have been told to take it because Paul said wives should submit. The preacher needs to be aware of this and deal with it head on. Abuse is

sin and no woman should be asked to “take it.” The community needs to hold the abusive man accountable and protect the vulnerable. Paul exhorts the whole family to submit to one another and the husband is to love the wife as Jesus loved the church, sacrificing everything, even his own life for her. This is not an excuse for anyone to abuse another, but it is God’s statement of value for the family itself. It is a picture of his love for the church, a great mystery in which we participate in every marriage.

This gives the preacher a great time to speak about the sanctity and the sacramental nature of marriage. The sacramental Christian finds the handiwork of God in everything, as Christ has reconciled the whole world to himself, now we find everything becomes an occasion for us to see Christ in the world, everything has become something holy in Christ. This is especially true of our family. Herein God loves us with his forgiving love when we forgive each other, care for each other in weakness and sickness, and when we weep with each other in our grief. That is Jesus’ arm which our spouse puts around us, that is Jesus who feeds us, that Jesus who offers us words of comfort and advice, shepherding us through life.

4. Fresh Joy (OT and Psalm: That the Holy Spirit of God would turn the hopes and expectations of the hearer away from the solutions offered by the world and toward the promises of God in Christ.)

This is a classic faith sermon – people believing is a good thing and the preacher may well want to point to something specific at the end in terms of what that looks like in the life the believer. But don’t hold that out as the reason we believe, don’t go therapeutic on this. This is a sermon which proclaims that God is the answer to the problems we face but his answers may not look like our preferred outcomes.

The title is taken from the end of the OT reading. Isaiah says that the meek shall have fresh joy in God. The poor will exult. We have too often made meekness into a virtue for this to have the full impact. The ancients did not see things that way. The meek were the folks who got stomped on in the ancient world. The assertive, strong, and confident folks were the ones a reasonable person sought to emulate.

Isaiah puts the reader into the sandals of the guy on the bottom of the heap. The humble poor man who is not virtuously humble, just the guy who has everything go south for him. His hope is not in the king – the king won’t remember him or care for him. His hope is not in some demagogue, roiling up the people. Those rarely turn out well for the people on the bottom. Just ask the masses of folks who rioted in the Arab spring. Life is pretty tough when you are longing for the return of a brutal dictatorship. This man should not expect good things from the capitalism which seems to offer opportunity or the socialism which promises him the resources of the state. The folks on the bottom have rarely really been helped by either. The poor will always be with us. Someone said that. We should probably listen to him.

The hope of the poor man is in God alone and for this God holds him up as our example today. For all these things also call us to allegiance and worship. We will not find true happiness and joy in the products which beautiful models try to sell us in magazines and on our television shows. Consumerism is empty and leaves us cold and hollow.

Politicians are an easy target right now. Does anyone think this crop of Presidential candidates really will help us? If the choice between Hilary and Donald I am not sure what I would do. But there are many others. Some escape into games, whether it is athletics, video games, or some consuming hobby, we can seek joy there but the day comes when the joy is empty. Sorry all you Duck/Tide/Seahawk/Husker/Cardinal/etc., fans out there. You can wear the branded apparel and pay your tithe to the ticket office and Comcast, but true happiness won't be found there. But you know that.

Even church can become an idol. Just listen to what Jesus says today. They have put promises made to the temple above loving parents. Will it bring them true joy? No.

Isaiah and the psalm have a very bleak picture for us. There is only one source of this fresh and true joy. There is only place the human being can exult, truly exult. Look out over the landscape of human culture and history. It all fails, but one. That one rose from the dead, that one lives and reigns to all eternity. That one offers real hope. The potter has shaped us for his kingdom and our true joy can only be had in him.