

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 2 (Proper 17)

What is the human being? The Bible asks that question and marvels that God even bothers with him. (Psalm 8:4) But if the Psalmist's low appraisal of the human being remains our estimation of the human being, we have fundamentally denied the very action of God. For the psalmist goes on in that psalm to say that God's name is great because he does take note of humanity. God does in fact bother with the human being. He has come into the flesh of humanity and bothered a great deal about us, healing the sick, comforting the sinner, raising the dead, and of course dying himself and rising again in the glorified flesh of his humanity. He did not leave his humanity in the grave but perfected it, raised it to heaven's throne and today lives and reigns as God himself and human.

What does that prompt us to say about ourselves? We have discussed this before and this Sunday will resume a discussion and exploration of the human being which has occupied us already this summer. You might want review a few of our notes from prior weeks since we all know that preachers don't really do that much. (Just an hour a week, right? ☺)

Perhaps I should review a little here. Lutherans have inherited from Augustine and through Luther a pretty pessimistic view of the human being. This is based on passages in Paul and a great deal of experience. After all, we are not really short of examples of sin, are we? We know very well that we have often fallen short of the glory of God, and we know that all of us deserve nothing but God's punishment and wrath because of our sin. We know that very well or at least we know it better than some.

This is all true, of course, but it is not the whole story and there is another side to the biblical witness, a whole facet of what God says which is not addressed in that anthropology which is described above. As Luther would also note, we are both sinner and saint *simul justus et peccator*. That saint part can make us uncomfortable, and it should, but that discomfort dare not lead us to deny it.

The texts today will speak of the saint and to the saint, the regenerate man or woman whom God has raised from the waters of Baptism and who lives to do the Law of God, who delights in the Christian duty to love neighbor, God, and self. Perforce, this discussion will be morally optimistic. The Bible will talk to us as if we really are capable of doing these things. The question will almost be whether we believe what God has done to us and in us in Christ. Has he really cleansed us from all our sins? Does that make a difference for the decisions I make and the shape of my whole life? Shall I live that way? I can.

Paul will speak of simply being smart, using the gifts of God as weapons and armor against the assaults of the Devil. He will speak of the Christian employing spiritual shield, sword, and breastplate against the ancient foe and his minions. It is the sort of discussion that stirs the heart to action, but I wonder if we have not so drilled ourselves into the "I'm a worm" mentality that we doubt that we can effectively fight Satan with those good gifts. And if we are thus so

pessimistic about it all, do we simply fail to show up for battle? Unable to rise from our cot in the barracks and don our armor because we are just too demoralized by all the “sinner” preaching.

Deuteronomy will appeal to our experience and rational thought in encouraging us to keep the rules, laws, statutes, and commandments of God. But are we so familiar with our failings that we despair of any keeping of those commandments? When Moses enjoins us to keep the commandments of God, do we imagine he is talking to someone else because obviously I am not going to? Does that attitude reflect the words we confess with Paul that Jesus has taken up residence in us (Gal. 2:20)? Jesus speaks today of the fact that what comes out of the heart of a person that renders clean and unclean, not the adherence to some external rules about hand washing or a kosher diet. But do we see only bile in our own hearts and have we therefore missed the Jesus who is also there because we have eaten his flesh and drunk his blood? I have appended the next story onto the Gospel lesson today, a story which is optional next week. It is the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman from whose heart comes an amazing statement of faith and trust in Jesus. Are we so afraid of puffing up pride that we don't let Jesus speak those same testimonies through our lips? If we are, do we in fact stifle the work of the Spirit among us? Do we, through a humanly created filter which we have named doctrinal rectitude, ignore the much more important work of Christ in our lives? It is true, in a world which denies the very existence of sin, we must hammer at our sinfulness. But can we do so in a way which denies our forgiven status?

Today's readings will challenge us a little in our Lutheran ethos. I love our Lutheran-ness and in truth know that the optimism of Arminianism and some other traditions has led to a great deal of mischief. A woman I know has been baptized four times because she believes that if she really believes she can achieve perfection of her will. (She is a devotee of the Four-Square tradition.) She believes that if she is really a Christian she no longer will want to sin. But she still sins, and sometimes she really wanted it. The old person lurks within her and that scabby old sinner delights in the darkness still. So, when that old woman pokes her head out of the bilious goo at the bottom of her heart, she repents of that, she concludes that the prior baptism must not have taken. Filled with conviction and new resolve, she passes through the waters again and in so doing really also denies the presence of Christ in her life another way.

There is a bit of a mine field here, a delicate balancing that has to happen in this sermon. The preacher really must know his congregation well. Luther used to liken this to a drunken man riding a horse. We tend to fall off on one side and in getting back on, fall off on the other side. (He did have a way with words.) The successful preacher should probably only hope to stay in the saddle for a little while and be prepared to fall off one way or the other before the morning has ended.

Collect of the Day

O God, the source of all that is just and good, nourish in us every virtue and bring to completion every good intent that we may grow in grace and bring forth the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God is the source of all that is good and just. What do we put into those categories? It is easy to let such abstractions roll off the tongue, but putting a face, a thing into those categories is hard. Even those basics like mom and apple pie have been proven to be bad for the cholesterol and certainly not all mothers are an unmitigated good. Some time ago we recollect that the news bore the sad tidings of a woman who admitted to killing her three small children. If we cannot even declare mothers to be an absolute good, what good and just things do we ascribe to God?

There lurks another question here with the preacher will want to consider. Is the "us" in the first line inclusive of every human being? Or is it just Christians? The prayer is simply addressed to God who authors justice and goodness. That God could be the address of every human prayer, even those uttered by Moslems or Hindus or others. We want God to nourish virtue in all human beings. We could easily be praying that God helps non-Christians to be honest, kind, compassionate, and other things which we could consider virtues. It sounds a little more specific toward the end when we speak of growing in grace and bearing good fruit, but I wonder if we are not just praying for all humanity here. I rather think so. Of course, when we pray this prayer, we likely need to start with those virtues being inculcated and nurtured in my own heart.

Nourish - He has through Word and Sacrament put good and just things inside of me, most especially His Son and His Spirit. The Christian will want to remember that the virtues which we pray God nourishes and the good intentions that we pray that he brings to completion are of themselves gifts of God as well. This is a tough sell for the American crowd which delights in the idea of our personal autonomy and basic goodness, but it has genuine implications for the person who is plagued by their own failings or proud in their own success. The American idolatry is an idolatry of the will, we imagine that what we decide will do us the most good and if someone is failing, it is a failure of the will.

For the despairing sinner, any talk of my own abilities will be heard as a further condemnation of their own inability. For the man who is proud of his own deeds, this will just feed that sin like fertilizer, allowing it to blossom and bear the wicked fruit of arrogance and cruelty. The virtues and the completion of those virtues are some of the good and just things whose source lies with God.

But this then asks another set of questions of us. What are virtues? One does not have to look too far to find those who hold up vices and perversions as another form of virtue. Our government has given the holy term "marriage" to all homosexuals who want it. My own state has declared that smoking marijuana is "legal." In the last few years many protestant denominations have opted to bless same sex unions of some sort. Many of those who cast those votes thought that their Church was doing a virtuous thing. They held up the virtue of inclusion and tolerance and

found it be a thing from God and acted on it. The folks who voted to legalize marijuana did not believe they were doing a bad thing.

We cannot escape the question of what is virtue. If you have read the text “Unchristian” you know that many of the young people inside the church and most folks outside the confines of Christianity have an impression of the faithful that they are intolerant of homosexuals, to the point that they hate them, that they delight in their belief that they are going to hell. I don’t believe that most Christians actually harbor those sorts of feelings, but we also need to admit that some do, and such things are decidedly non-virtuous. I doubt that most of the ELCA, Presbyterian, UCC, or Methodist delegates to their national assemblies are active advocates of a homosexual lifestyle. I tend to see this vote as an attempt, misguided and problematic, to distance themselves from the larger perception of Christians.

In the coming years, Christians will have to rediscover the notion of virtue. We have too long allowed the largely Christian culture in which we live do that for us, as if being American and being Christian were the same thing. We can no longer count on that culture to be that identity for us. It is instructive, I think, to realize that the first century Roman Empire was a highly sexually charged atmosphere, filled with some rather gross and overt homosexual attitudes and activities, and the Christian movement grew because it asserted a living and empowered view of virtue, a virtue given by Christ and realized in part in the life of every Christian.

So just what is Just?

God is just. Perhaps he is strangely just to our perspective. But when we acknowledge that God is the source of all things that are just, what do we mean? Justice is really about what is right. What is right that we can attribute to God?

Are we talking about everyday sorts of things? Are we talking about an equality of love which one might see in a loving marriage or friendship? Are we talking about simply treating our parents and our children well, no not perfectly, but simply doing well by them? Notice the verses which precede the Epistle reading’s famous words about the armor of God. Paul is talking about nuts and bolts sorts of things. Is this justice found in loving our spouse, sometimes despite him or her?

Can the Christian do things that are just? Can the unbeliever do something that is just? If he does, can we see God even working for the benefit of people through someone who does not acknowledge God? One of the best thing I have learned from missionaries is that long before they arrived to proclaim the Gospel, God was there. He loved those people long before we got there. In OT we see it too. Cyrus did not believe in God, yet God calls him his servant? God can use whatever means he wants to work in this world, even a miserable emperor like Nero whom Paul exhorted his people to honor and pray for.

What is Good? I was once part of a group of Sunday School teachers who could not honestly say there was anything good about themselves. But isn’t that a fundamental denial that God is at

work in their lives? Is not Good that which God has made and said to be good? Read Genesis 1. Listen to the words of a Baptism or take to heart the words we speak regularly at the communion rail. This body and blood keeps us with Christ. That is good.

What is it to grow in grace?

- 1. More apt to forgive and express the grace of God to every situation?*
- 2. Paul and the writer to the Hebrews speak of a spiritual maturity, so they can eat the “meat” of the material they are talking about.*
- 3. Is this growth found in an increasing graciousness on the part of the Christian? We get to look more like Jesus somehow, loving, caring, serving, etc.*

We don't think this means that one is more saved. The growth is not in status before God. We are always his dear children. But the growth here is akin to a married couple who can say after forty years of marriage that they are “more married” than they were on that day when they spoke their vows to one another. The IRS doesn't recognize that, but relationally/emotionally, they certainly are more married.

Readings

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

“And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. ² You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you. ³ *Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Baal-peor, for the LORD your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed the Baal of Peor.* ⁴ *But you who held fast to the LORD your God are all alive today.* ⁵ *See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.* ⁶ *Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’* ⁷ *For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?* ⁸ *And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?*

⁹ *“Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children's children—¹⁰ how on the day that you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, the LORD said to me, ‘Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.’¹¹ And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom.*

¹² Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. ¹³ And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone.

¹⁴ And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess.

I have included omitted verses and extended the reading because Moses refers to things which the people of God were to remember. In the past when we read these verses we found it ironic that Moses said do not add or take away from this Law and immediately thereafter we omitted three verses. In those verses he lists out the stuff they were supposed to remember.

We were interested in verse 8. A generation ago we would have applied these words to the United States, assuming that we were somehow the country which all others would want to emulate. But ask the folks in Native American populations about how good and just that is. Many of these folks see that Christianity brought great evil to their communities. Many of our young people read Leviticus 19 and other passages and wonder how we can think that these are superior laws. Adulterous women are stoned but men are fined. Homosexuality is condemned and the processes of finding out the truth in a criminal case are just bizarre sometimes. How can we say that this is a more just and righteous Law than the other nations have? It looks barbarous to many.

We could point to the time in which it was written. In fact, Moses' law was a significant improvement over the child-sacrificing and escalating violence of retribution which seemed to obtain in the ancient world. The fact that adulterous women were stoned seems barbarous, but in the ancient world they might have stoned her whole family as well.

Perhaps we need to talk about this in larger terms. Without God and without any sort of system like this we would have no ability to talk about justice at all. The very notion of justice seems to demand an absolutely just God. We also need to be careful that we are not painted into a corner in which God is portrayed as just without mercy. The Bible's whole point is that adulterous women are not stoned because Jesus died. Look at John 8! We also, however, need to be careful that we do not replace this with a merciful God who has no justice. There is a difficult balance to keep here.

Three years ago when we read those omitted verses we wondered just who is Baal-Peor today? The ancients who worshipped him believed a narrative which we think to be simply odd. Visiting a temple prostitute somehow put the divinity in an amorous mood with his consort and somehow that made it rain here on earth. What a bizarre way to think of things. We know that the drought we are experiencing in California is because too many of us drive SUV's.

OK, that was intended as irony. But are we really that much better. We have identified a false god of our own happiness which we will pursue with all diligence and devotion. We will sacrifice our children, our marriage, just about anything in order to obtain this happiness. It is a brutal

task master whose creed and demands often simply results in our misery. When Jesus addresses 'Mammon' as a God, is this really that much different than what we do. We are afflicted with affluenza. Is this a narrative that really makes that much sense when we compare it to that of ancient Israel? Not really. We are not that much more sophisticated than they were. It is the heresy of modernity to suggest that we are smarter than the ancients.

Notice too that the wisdom of the Israelites, their understanding was not a mental activity, it was located in the keeping of the commands of God. Wisdom was a life lived, not a mental state.

There is a sense in these words that obedience is simply a given, a thing which is. We keep these commandments because this is simply who we are. We are the people whom God rescued from Egypt, those sorts of people do this. This is not people who are afraid or beaten down who have been crushed and remade.

Notice how Moses really thinks they can do it. The writer to the Hebrews 4:2 notices that this does not benefit them because they did not have faith. I think it is necessary to notice that the Torah, the teaching/commandments of the OT were mostly about how broken and sinful people could restore relationship with God. Most of the Torah speaks to the restoration of relationship: the sacrificial system, Joseph forgiving his brothers for the same sin that drove Cain out in chapter 4, etc.

There are a couple of interesting things going on in this text. The omitted verses are a negative and positive example which I think is a problem to omit. I know why they did this, most folks don't have enough Biblical knowledge to have a clue what Baal-Peor is, and most readers will be totally flummoxed by it. But the idea that our faithfulness to the promises and commandments of God has real consequences is actually found in those verses.

Moses is holding up the virtuous life of the faithful person as a pretty good thing to do. And let's face it, keeping the Ten Commandments is a pretty good way to live. Moses says it will enable them to live and take possession of that which God has given them. Conversely said, breaking the law will result in death and serve as an impediment to really having the gifts of God. This is true. Adultery, murder, insolence, and slander do not make a person happy, indeed they often result in profound sadness, hurt, and pain.

Moses also suggests that this has an effect, and impact on the people who live around us. They see us and notice what is going on. They will see our prosperity and our joy and they will want some of that. They will seek to join us because they see the blessing of our life. One has to exercise real caution here because this could easily become a health and wealth gospel which says that if we keep the rules God will reward us with wealth and health. But on the other hand, we cannot be so afraid of that error that we miss this point. There is a blessing in keeping God's law and when we break it, the world does notice, and when we keep it, the world does note that as well. The Christian who loves and has joy is something of a mystery to the world. That mystery is a powerful way for God to reach people.

The second interesting point in here is the admonition that this is not a sure thing. One needs to guard one's life and one needs to be intentional about inculcating this in your children. My father used to quip that the church was always one generation from extinction. I think he got that from Billy Graham. If we do not pass this on to our children, what will they do? I doubt they will come to church in any numbers just because we want them too. They need to hear this as something which is important for their life too. They need to see its import in our lives.

Moses has a really strong sense here that this thing which is theirs because they have walked through the Red Sea and eaten the manna and drunk from the rock, this thing needs to be passed along to children. That is a deliberate and intentional act on the part of parents.

For many of us, we are facing a group of folks on Sunday whose children have not come to church. The aging of the church in North America is largely the result of an entire generation simply walking away from it. There certainly is enough cause for guilt in the parents of that generation. But there is also some moral responsibility in the group that has walked away as well. We cannot lay that entirely at the feet of the elderly. But if you stress this, you also will need to stress that God is gracious, forgiving and hopeful for their children too.

Psalm 119:129-136

Pe

- ¹²⁹ Your testimonies are wonderful;
therefore my soul keeps them.
- ¹³⁰ The unfolding of your words gives light;
it imparts understanding to the simple.
- ¹³¹ I open my mouth and pant,
because I long for your commandments.
- ¹³² Turn to me and be gracious to me,
as is your way with those who love your name.
- ¹³³ Keep steady my steps according to your promise,
and let no iniquity get dominion over me.
- ¹³⁴ Redeem me from man's oppression,
that I may keep your precepts.
- ¹³⁵ Make your face shine upon your servant,
and teach me your statutes.
- ¹³⁶ My eyes shed streams of tears,
because people do not keep your law.

Psalm 119 is amazing in that every one of its 176 verses somehow mentions the law of God, the word of God, the promises, the statues, etc. You might also be interested to know that this is an acrostic psalm, each section begins with another letter of the Hebrew alphabet, this one happens to be "pe" which is much like our "p."

I have not found a good commentary on this psalm. Luther saw it as a reflection on the first commandment. That works, but I am wishing I could intersect with this psalm better than I do. I think the key to this is to read it emotionally. Consider the emotional state of the author in relationship to God.

129 – Awe before the LORD

130 – Enlightened by God’s word

131 – Desperate for God’s Word

132 – Longing for God’s attention

133 – Insecure about my abilities

134 – Afraid of fellow humans – needing God’s help

135 – Longing for God’s attention and instruction

136 – Grief that others have not been taught to obey as I have been taught.

Do you see the progression in here? The awe of the first verse has transformed into something which he wants to share, which he wants others to know. Notice too how he has unpacked the instruction of God. He needs it, he is insecure and afraid. He gets it and that translates into a love for others and a desire that they see the same enlightenment he has experienced.

Ephesians 6:10-20

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³ “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” ⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

⁵ Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, ⁶ not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸ knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. ⁹ Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵ and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given

by the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; ¹⁷ and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, ¹⁸ praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, ¹⁹ and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

This is the end of Paul's capstone letter, the summation of his career. Just as Moses was in Deuteronomy was giving his final sermon, I think Paul was giving a last sermon here. I am not alone. Luke T. Johnson thinks this way too and he is much smarter than I am. There are some similarities in what they say. Paul speaks of arming oneself against the evil one. Moses does the same – Do these things, keep these commandments, teach and live them. They are your defense!

Paul enjoins us to be strong in the Lord. This strength is not our strength, not a strength we find in ourselves and of our selves. The strength is in Jesus, not us. When we think this is our strength we will succumb to a kind of Theology of Glory. That said, we cannot just avoid this text. Just because people abuse this passage doesn't mean we can ignore it, indeed, that means we need to address this healthily and sanely. There are many who leap to millennialism and see us as engaged in some end of the world battle here. There is truth in that, but out of proper context such thinking feeds our human pride.

Paul ends strong, with a powerful martial image of a Christian wearing the armor of a Roman legionary. Our battle is not really against the things of flesh and blood which seem to perplex us, but it is against a whole assemblage of spiritual realities which hate the very idea of our faith and God's love within us.

I have included the opening verses which we don't see in this reading because I think it is important to realize that this exciting and powerful image that Paul uses is actually rooted in very normal things that everyday people do. Masters and servants, parents and children are all using this armor.

We are to take up and wear the armor which God has provided and wield the weapons which has placed into our hands. We have a belt of truth and breastplate of righteousness. Belts hold your armor together, without truth this whole thing will fall apart. Righteousness, the breastplate guards our vital organs, our life itself. The Gospel of peace is our footwear and it makes us ready, ready to run toward our foe because we know that there is no enemy which is bigger than Jesus' sacrifice. My enemy thinks of himself as my enemy, but the gospel of peace sees him differently, he is not my enemy but a person for whom Jesus died or he is Satan himself. In either event I will readily run forward to engage them. I will either forgive him or slay him, I cannot really lose. Faith is our shield which quenches the flaming arrows designed to torment and distract us. These are the lies with which the Devil would distract us from Jesus. Faith is that relationship with God in which He saves us. The devil would distract us from God's benevolent

gaze, but faith shields us from that, it is the very act of looking at God and seeing our savior. Salvation guards our minds, our heads, so that we may see through its opening the world around us. Encased in salvation we are safe. Lastly we wield a weapon, God's Word, His Spirit, so that with prayer and supplication, we engage our enemy not with weapons of our mind or our physical strength but with God himself energizing our limbs and our lips. His is the edge which separates flesh and bone and which brings about the victory.

This is all done in prayer, praying for all the saints, but especially for Paul as he lies in prison, that God would use even that dismal place to make him into an instrument of God's gracious love.

If you are going to preach this, I would have you pay particular attention to some important words that Paul uses here which contextualize this whole image and give it purpose. The point is that we are part of a larger picture, we are given gifts so that we may stand. That does not mean we will see the final victory in our standing, indeed, every battle sees losses on both sides, but we will stand in the face of the enemy's onslaught and be confident that the final victory is ours. We do not preach a theology of glory, we may win the day but look a lot like Jesus on the cross in that battle. It might hurt a great deal, but that does not mean we have lost, merely looked like Jesus, followed him, taken up a cross and shouldered the Savior's burden with him. But that victory is a victory which transcends ourselves. We pray for Paul so that in him others may hear. We are not just praying for our own wellbeing and that we may win the day, but that Christ may win this day.

There is another point to make here. In Paul's day, the Roman soldier who took the field never did so alone. His shield and weapons made him part of a larger unit that fought in synchrony and was a very effective military force. One could also preach a sermon on the Church here. The soldier trains together and wages battle together with his comrades.

Mark 7:14-23

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."¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the

people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot

defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within,

out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,

²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

²⁴ And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. ²⁵ But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸ But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹ And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰ And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

Jesus continues his discourse, but now with the disciples in private. He had been in open conflict with the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law last week, but now he has taken the conversation first, for a line or two, to the crowds but mostly inside the house, inside the Church. In his verses to the crowd today he simply states the truth: It is not keeping the kosher laws or breaking them that makes a man clean or unclean, it is what comes out of his heart, it is what lives inside of us. That is what makes a man or a woman clean or unclean. We often don't get it, but this was really revolutionary in Jesus' day. He is radically reinterpreting the Torah for these people.

These words rock the disciples' world. This is so revolutionary that they have to have an explanation of what is going on here. In private, but not so private that we are excluded, which is Mark's way of telling the reader that he or she is a disciple too, Jesus teaches the disciples.

Jesus is incredulous. Are you really so thick that you need this explained to you? Is this a critique of Mark's own generation? Probably. Remember that first century Christianity had fought bitterly over this issue. Most of Paul's letters contain some reference to the food that people eat, circumcision, keeping of OT ceremonial law and how necessary it is for the Christian. Mark is having Jesus himself comment on this whole discussion. If you don't think so, just look at Mark's editorial comment at the end of verse 19. This is a real issue for Mark and his audience, or this would not be in there.

The laundry list of sins which reside in the heart is the very stuff of the Lutheran anthropology. We really are worms, we root around in the foulest of stuff, we eat it, it is in us and it comes out in our sins. We are all the filth of the universe. It is true. God knows it better than we do and he has grieved over what sin and rebellion have worked in our heart as much as Satan has delighted in it.

But I think the editors of our pericope system did us a great disservice by not including the next story and then even making that story optional for next week. Starting with verse 24, Jesus leaves the land of the kosher delis and enters Syrophenicia, the land of Tyre and Sidon. This region north of Judea had something of a reputation. It was long considered a den of moral turpitude. Remember that God gave some pretty compelling reasons for wiping out the Canaanites when

Joshua entered the land, including their sexualization of worship, child sacrifice, temple prostitution, etc. These guys are culturally really of the same ilk. Mark's more Greek oriented audience may not have been as aware of the OT's estimation of these people, but Syrophenicia would have resonated with them too. Herodotus in his description of the Persian invasions under Darius and Xerxes notes that he was joined by contingents of ships from this part of the world, personally commanded by their queen. They thought her a traitor to the Greek ethos and unnatural in her willingness to go to war, a decidedly male enterprise in the first millennium BC.

Jesus is sought out and persistently badgered by a woman of that region whose daughter, whose little girl, had a demon. If there ever was a candidate for inclusion in the unclean club, it's this woman. She comes from the uncircumcised, ham devouring, idol worshipping Canaanites. She has a daughter who is a demoniac, probably covered in tattoos, drug-using, wantonly dressed, and morally challenged. And yet, look at what comes out of her mouth. It is the very words of faith, words which prompt Jesus to give her the same liberation from demons that he has given others already in this gospel.

This of course makes a little more sense of Jesus' difficult words. He calls her a dog. It is true, she is a Canaanite dog. The Jews hated these guys and with reason and I think Jesus is speaking ironically here, using the disciples own language for her. But she turns Jesus' (disciples?) words against him - even the dogs get their crumbs. Jesus is pulling out her the words he can use to teach the lesson to his disciples that they don't get in the prior paragraph. It isn't about what you eat, it's about whose inside your heart. God had filled her heart with love for a very unloveable daughter. And Jesus drew out of her lips words that were indeed worthy because they were spoken in faith. And her little girl was cleansed of this horrible scourge.

So we might wonder, is worship the external which we insist that God should notice and thereby distinguish us from the "other." I have to wonder if some of the hyper-liturgical or hyper contemporary types have not fallen into this. Of course we can also raise other things to this level which God should notice. I have met some who are convinced that only Lutherans go to heaven. Do we imagine that God is really keeping a record of that?

Do we draw up a list of sins which are deemed to be egregious to be inside the pale of God's love? Does God really make that distinction in sinfulness?

George Carlin once said, "The greatest cause of atheism is Christians, They honor God with their lips and deny him with their actions. This is what an unbelieving world finds absolutely unbelievable." (I cannot footnote this – can anyone else?)

"Preach the Gospel always – use words when necessary" - Francis of Assisi.

Have we instead been found to preach the condemnation of Jesus and not the grace/forgiveness of Jesus?

Often we have a notion that we have the Gospel, so the world should just come to us. Do we unwittingly say this when we say that evangelism is bringing someone to Church instead of

inviting them to meet Jesus? There is a sense that we are willing to be Christ to anyone who comes to us, on our terms, in our worship, speaks our language/culture. But how do we communicate the idea that Christ was out there seeking and saving the lost folks, even this Canaanite woman, even the unclean and non-kosher folks. Evangelism is really meeting people and bringing the Gospel to them. It is one beggar telling another beggar where to find a hot meal. Jesus will save them, that is his good work and he loves to do it. But how do we get out there to bring the Gospel to them. We are out there, already, we don't really need to get out there and meet more people, the question is how we articulate Christ in the relationships in which Christ has placed us.

How do we welcome and love anyone without being perceived as being sinfully permissive in this culture? How do we communicate morality without being labeled another Christian who hates everyone else?

Law

1. God has given me a blessed way to live, I have not done a very good job of living that life. Many of the struggles I face in my own relationships, in my own health, in my own job, are problems of my own making. I have contributed to them with abrasive behavior, gluttonous lifestyle, sloth, and mixed up priorities. Out of my heart have come all sorts of nasty things.
2. Too often others, including my neighbors, family, especially my own children, have seen in me anything but the virtuous life. I have shown them how to bear grudges, how to get even, how to work too much and love too little.
3. Out of my heart comes all sorts of nasty stuff. If I suppress it, at least endeavor to live civilly within my community, am I really any different at heart from the guy who cracks up in the post office or who flaunts his deviant sexuality? I share the same heart, but I have kept a lid on it, so far. (I always am reminded that the BTK killer in Kansas was the chairman of his Lutheran congregation!)
4. I am, however very good at making inconsistent distinctions. I join my country club and immediately start noticing that the greens on my course are simply better than yours. We would never let someone like you in. When we make some choice, we almost immediately we turn around and draw an imaginary line somewhere behind us and delight that “they” and most likely “you” are on the other side of it. Despite all myself inflicted woe, I can probably convince myself that at least I am better than you.
5. This takes vicious form in churches, tragically the very places that are supposed to be different. For some it is a particular sin, as if God did not forbid lying as much as he did any other sin. For others it is socio-economics, racism, or even old people. (I once heard a person say she would not go to a church that had old people in it. I guess that rather limited her involvement to next few years and then she would have to quit herself. I

personally envisioned myself in a ministry to my fellow beautiful, rich and famous people, but God had other ideas for me.)

Gospel

1. God has not waited for me to get any of this right before he reached out to me. The Israelites of old dallied with idols while I have to some extent made a mess of my own life, and strangely God's love perseveres to us all. He goes to the Syro-Phoenician woman.
2. God has a way of taking unlikely folks and turning them into the very sorts of witnesses that he has in mind. The ancient Israelites were slaves and idolators, but from them God raised Moses and David and many others. Saul persecuted Christians but was a changed man after he encountered Jesus on that road to Damascus. My past is not the definer of who I am; rather, that privilege belongs to Jesus who this day sets me aright with God and launches me on the rest of my life.
3. And he plants in my heart something new and beautiful. The Syro-Phoenician woman was one of them, so are you. The hymns we sing and the confession we make, the love speak, and the deeds we do speak eloquently to another thing dwelling in our hearts, a Spirit and a Son of God.
4. And so God laughs at our little distinctions and like Jesus did for the disciples He must blow our minds once in a while. Perhaps it is the schizophrenic who speaks with clarity or the homeless man who shows you a kindness that does this. I learned this from a lapsed Mormon who spoke eloquently of the love of Jesus and an unschooled Methodist, a high school dropout, who taught this seminary graduate how to pray. From unlikely places God calls forth his faith.
5. And so God imposes his vision on the church, not ours. It is always a collection of sinners and evangelism is best understood to be one beggar telling another where he can get a hot meal. Yes, that means he gathers hypocrites and scoundrels, crabby old folks and youngsters who want to upend the world. He has room for them all. That is good, he has room me and for you, even for them.

Sermon Ideas

1. Out of heart proceeds....(That the hearer would believe that God has created in him/her a clean heart and renewed a right spirit which produces a new life in Him.)

This sermon explores the sinner and saint tension. It will likely take some effort to see the saint half of that equation. Granted, we are saints because of God's great work, not our own merit, but that does not mean we are any less a saint. Indeed, because God has done

it, we are truly saint. If I had done it, I would have failed. God does not. This sermon wants the congregation to own the gift that God has given.

One option with this is to take it into a sermon about the fact that all of us start out in the same place. We are all people Jesus is talking about in the Gospel with the heart problem. It is pretty easy to start drawing lines in which we make distinctions that God does not make. The Jews of Jesus day were doing it with food, no ham sandwiches, and the like. But such distinctions are really contrary to the kingdom. We are all really starting out as corpses, spiritually dead. The difference between the disciple and the woman's daughter with the demon is not really all that great. They both need and get the same Jesus.

Taking a good hard look inside your own heart is both difficult and often disconcerting. There are some nasty things in the dark corners down there. But the Christian needs to be aware that this is not simply raw video footage we see. It is always footage that is filtered for us. As a sinner, our enemy wants us to see a certain unsavory part of ourselves. He wants us to see that we have not measured up and that we are wretched sinners. It is true, all the things he shows us in there are true, but he is desperately afraid that we will look inside ourselves and see something else. Lutherans might just be particularly prone to seeing only this filtered version. We have inherited from Luther a particularly dark picture of the human being. So, are we especially easy for Satan to convince that we are only sinners, and not also saints?

Satan is afraid we will see the new heart that has beat within us since the day Christ spoke our name in baptism, he is afraid we will see the Spirit who flows in and through us. Our task as a preacher this day is to proclaim that other reality, but not just that they might see it, but that seeing it that reality might take expression in a life which is a testimony to God's love and an instrument of God's grace to this broken world. The Syro- Phoenician woman was a gift to the disciples. The Jewish people of old were to be a gift to the nations around them. God has established you here in this community to be a gift to your neighbors, a gift of God's love. To make that possible he has planted inside you something really amazing, something beautiful, something good.

What is the good which God has created us to be right here? Is it that we come to the doctor's office with a different sort of attitude, a blessing to others and not just a consumer of medical services? Do we ask the nurse who takes our blood pressure how she is doing today and really want her answer? Do we ask "What would make this a great day for you?" don't accept the pleasantries as the end of the conversation. Do we come to conflicted situations differently? Do we perhaps suffer a little differently; maybe we don't complain quite so much when things don't go quite right? I know a man who always invites the server in the restaurant to pray with him when he says grace before the meal.

What does it look like to be a Jesus person in this generation? What does it look like to be a saint here? Is it just looking up a widow and making sure that she doesn't spend her wedding anniversary alone? This sermon will rejoice that God has indeed done some really good things in our lives. God gets the glory, I don't, but he gets it when his good work takes shape and we recognize it. Does this perhaps raise a few expectations?

Are we personally guilty of this? When someone tells us "Good sermon" does it make us uncomfortable? Is there something wrong in saying that we are happy that God has touched them through me? Is it wrong to say, "Thank you" and to mean it?

2. Putting on the Armor of God (That the hearer would rejoice in the gifts God has given for the living of life and put them into practice for the good of self and neighbor and the furtherance of the kingdom of God)

Many of us are preaching in communities in which God is essentially absent. We are deists of a sort. We might acknowledge God's existence, but not his presence. We often therefore live lives which are wholly disconnected from God's presence, as if he was not part of my job, my treatment of family, etc.

We battle against spiritual forces, but that battle is enjoined in the very relationships in which we find ourselves. It is the cranky boss, the troublesome neighbor, the tense marriage, that we encounter these devices of the enemy. The flaming darts of our foe often look like the very people we love!

God has equipped us to enlist in a great and mighty host. At our head fights Jesus himself with angelic hosts and archangels as his lieutenants. This is important. The well equipped Christian stands already in the army of God. He is not getting recruited, he is not signing up. He is already in the ranks. Paul is talking to someone who is already in the heavenly forces. Standing with us are the stalwart saints of old, folks like David and Moses and Isaiah, and others. There are Peter and Paul and Augustine and Luther and many more. Your grandparents are in that lot.

Is the story of Joshua and Jericho helpful here? God took down those walls. The people obeyed, they marched and shouted and blew trumpets. But God worked the victory.

They put on armor and wielded weapons for this fight, the same armor and weapons which God has given us. This sermon is really a teaching sermon about the benefits of these gifts. Why does faith put out the flaming darts of the foe? How does the gospel of peace make us ready? Why do we need the truth like a belt to hold it all together? The Law development here is critical. There is a real foe out there and he is not the one the world recognizes. This is sort of a stealth battle. Our enemy is excellent at camouflage. Today he hides behind indifference and good concepts like liberty and tolerance and open-mindedness which one cannot gainsay but often they have become a cover for

something else. The contestant in this battle will need these gifts from God and will need to trust their efficacy.

You will want to discern whether it is a dose of truth or faith or hope or the Word which they most need as you craft this. What do they need most?

In Paul's time, armor worn by a legionary was important not only for himself but his neighbor. The shield protected his left side and the sword arm of the man to his left. He in turn depended on the shield of the man on his right. This stand your ground language is really communal, not individualistic.

3. Take care and be diligent (OT That God would encourage and empower the hearer to speak of the presence and blessing God to their family and friends.)

This sermon would be a sermon which would result in folks talking, but to get them to talk, you have to focus on the reason to talk. The people of God talk because they have been blessed. Moses points the folks of old to the good of God's presence.

One can have the idea that God is getting to be less and less of a presence in our world. But just because we have forgotten doesn't mean that God has forgotten about us. He is calling us to lives of witness and love based on his blessed presence in our lives. He is empowering that for us, the same God who was active in the lives of those folks so long ago.

We have this strange notion that God is not paying attention to us if we don't pay attention to him. But just because our culture has forgotten him, doesn't mean he has forgotten us. Indeed, his steadfast love never ends and you and I are instruments of that love.

4. A Stream of Tears (Psalm – That the hearer, enlightened by the love of God and filled with his passion, would look upon the world as God sees it – both terribly broken and beautifully redeemed in Christ.)

The psalm ends with this image of the psalmist shedding a stream of tears because people do not follow the Law of God. That could, I suppose, be the statement of a terribly self-righteous prig. I rather think it is not. But if it is not going to be, then we need perhaps to pay attention to what is happening there and why he weeps and why we might join him in that weeping.

We weep when we look in the mirror – the first thing to talk about it seems to me is that the psalmist is not stating this from a position of self-righteous superiority. The psalm is clear about that. He longs for God because he is in darkness without God. He is insecure about his own abilities and is afraid of the things going on around him. These tears are not borne of some holiness which makes him superior. The psalmist and we have already looked in the mirror of God's word, the commandments which Moses enjoined us to keep

are a stunning rebuke to such snobbery. We just cannot be serious about thinking ourselves better than another.

But that is not the end of our weeping. God has indeed dried those tears and replaced them with holy joy and awe at God's enlightenment and gifts. Our fears and our insecurities are answered by God. But that turns our attention outward. God also weeps and we see the world through his gracious eyes. The darkness which has been dispelled in our lives still reigns in the world and its people. Its shadow still sometimes needs to be beaten back within our own homes and our own hearts. The old man is tenacious. But God looks upon this broken world, his world, the beautiful world he called good, truly good, in Genesis, and he weeps for its brokenness. He sees it in broken lives, broken homes, broken spirits, and broken people, enslaved to death itself. And with him our eyes are moved to weep.

Jesus wept as he stood by Lazarus' tomb. Jesus wept again when he beheld Jerusalem on his way to crucifixion and death. He wept again when soldiers pierced his hands and feet. His mother wept, his friends wept, the very world wept when he died. God's weeping at the brokenness of his world, unlike our weeping, is a powerful and beautiful thing. For God's weeping is born of his unimaginable love for his creation. Jesus's tears have a potency which changes everything.

Now, when we weep these streams of tears over a world which has gone awry, it is not that all is lost. We weep with Christ. Sin is still sin, death is still death, and there is much to weep for in this world. Our hearts and our eyes have been opened, however, to a holy grief. These are all the causes of our Lord's death and undone by our Lord's resurrection. We grieve the pain and the suffering caused by sin. It tears at our very lives. But our tears have been transformed as well because another has wept with us and his tears have saved all.