

Preaching Helps

July–September 2020: Fifth Sunday after Pentecost to Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Bonhoeffer Remembered in a Time of Crisis

The April 2020 issue of “Preaching Helps” honored the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women and the 40th anniversary of the ordination of women of color among Lutherans in North America. The ordained women who wrote for that issue had to submit their writing by March 1 and had no idea that a coronavirus would soon change life for them and millions around the world. *Currents in Theology and Mission* is a quarterly journal, but it couldn’t anticipate the quarter of April, May, and June 2020. By the time *Currents* was published on April 1, schools and many businesses were closed, and people could no longer worship together in church. Easter worship took place in front of computer screens. “Christ is risen!” the pastor proclaimed and one person sitting alone shouted, “Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!” It was true, but it didn’t sound the same. A month later over 100,000 people in the United States had died of COVID-19, most of them without family members near. Aides and nurses held the hands of dying elders in long-term care facilities.

Just when there were some signs of relief and reopening the economy, a black man named George Floyd was killed by a white police officer on Memorial Day in Minneapolis. The video image of a white policeman with his knee on George Floyd’s neck was superimposed on the Pentecost texts for the Sunday following his murder. Often the Acts text would have been the focus, but many pastors heard George Floyd’s, “I can’t breathe.” They turned to John’s gospel: “When Jesus had said this he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

How do we preach at a time like this?

Some say this is a “Bonhoeffer moment.” This year marks the 75th anniversary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s death on April 9, 1945. He was hanged twenty-one days before Hitler committed suicide, a few weeks before Allied troops liberated the camp where he was killed. While working on a lecture on Bonhoeffer’s preaching in April, I read his sermons available in English—a gift during the season of Lent. What was striking to me was how little he preached against Nazism or Hitler or the “disappearance” of the Jews. Some people may find his sermons apolitical even if his life was not. His active resistance to Hitler and Nazi ideology was political and led to his arrest and death.

But Bonhoeffer’s preaching was directed primarily to the church. He called the church to be obedient to Jesus Christ and above all, not captive to the state. If *Currents* couldn’t keep up with the three-month quarter that just ended, it was extremely difficult to keep up with the three months after Hitler’s election in January 1933: *February-Emergency Decree* suspended the constitution and gave Hitler unchallenged authoritarian power; *March-Malicious Practices Act* gave the government sweeping powers to prosecute anyone who criticized the Reich; *April-Restoration of the Professional Civil Services* banned Jews from civil service professions. In Easter that same year, Bavarian Bishop Hans Meiser prepared a proclamation extolling the government and its new laws, a proclamation to be read from every pulpit on Easter Sunday:

A state which brings into being again government according to God’s Laws should, in doing so, be assured not only of the applause but also of the glad and active cooperation of the Church. With gratitude and joy the Church takes note that the new state bans blasphemy, assails immorality, establishes discipline and order, with a strong hand...espouses the sanctity of marriage and Christian training for the young... kindling in thousands of hearts, in place of disparagement, an ardent love of *Volk* and Fatherland.¹

We can almost hear people singing: “Germany is ris’n today! Alleluia! Our triumphant holy day. Alleluia!” God was making Germany great again! Though Bonhoeffer didn’t preach overtly against the Reich, he was clear that there should be no “glad and active cooperation” with the government but rather people were to be faithful always to Jesus Christ.

One of his last sermons was written for the baptism of his name-sake Dietrich Bethge, son of his dear friends Eberhard and Renata Bethge. Bonhoeffer sent this sermon from prison in May 1944:

Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation...It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, be silenced, and we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking and organizing must be born anew, out of that **prayer and action**.

Preachers today are struggling to find new words, wondering if the church has been concerned above all with self-preservation. Hearing George Floyd’s cry for breath, preachers couldn’t preach words they had preached before. “Perhaps a

1. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English*, Vol. 14, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2013), 4.

lot of us will need to learn a new language before we dare speak peace into this unrest,” said Pastor Bradley Schmeling in his Pentecost sermon at Gloria Dei, St. Paul. Then he went on:

Perhaps I should speak for myself, a 57-year old white man, a senior pastor of a well-established Lutheran church. Even despite being gay in a hetero-sexist culture, I’m largely given every advantage and benefit of the doubt. No one would tweet me out as a thug if I shouted at a protest. If I was pulled over for having a broken taillight, it would be a courtesy so that I could be aware. If I had a counterfeit \$20 bill, the cashier would assume that I had been cheated, too.

I wonder if one of the first steps for those of us who are white is simply to stop talking and to listen to voices of color; to let voices of color be heard; to be given instructions and guidance on what’s needed; to recognize that we may not know what we need to know.²

In this issue of Preaching Helps you will hear several writers searching to find the words, not only pastors in Minneapolis but those farther away. I am grateful to each of them for calling the church to faithfulness in these times. Seventy-five years after Bonhoeffer was killed, we continue to hear his challenge: “We can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings.”

[**Please note:** These Preaching Helps include three days that aren’t on Sunday: Mary Magdalene, Apostle (July 22); Mary, Mother of Our Lord (August 15); and Holy Cross Day (September 14). Preachers might consider at least one of the days honoring a biblical woman in this year celebrating women’s ordination. Holy Cross day is marked every year by some congregations even if it’s on a Monday as it is this year. If you want to celebrate St. Michael and All Angels, see the wonderful commentary by Pr. Brad Froslee in *Currents* July 2019.]

I give thanks to the following writers for struggling to find words to preach this quarter: **Patrick Cabello Hansel** has served for 33 years in multicultural communities in the Bronx, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis. With his wife, Luisa, he pastors San Pablo/St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. Together they began the Semilla Center for Healing and the Arts. Patrick is a poet and fiction writer. His first book of poems *The Devouring Land* is available from Main Street Rag Publishing. His second book *Quitting Time* will be published by Atmosphere Press in late 2020. **Melanie Heuser Hill** lives and writes and occasionally preaches in the Minneapolis area. In addition to being an ELCA pastor, she is also an author of children’s books: the novel *Giant Pumpkin Suite* and the picture book *Around the Table That Grandad*

Built, both published by Candlewick Press. You can see more of what she’s up to on her website: MelanieHeuserHill.com. **Justin Lind-Ayres** currently serves as one of the university pastors at Augsburg University in Minneapolis. He and his family are members of Edina Community Lutheran Church where he joyfully learns by teaching 5th Grade Sunday School. **Catherine Malotky** retired from full-time work and now serves part-time as Grant and Project Manager in the Stewardship Leadership Program at Luther Seminary. She earned an MA in theater from Northwestern and the M.Div. from Luther. Catherine has served congregations in inner city Minneapolis and rural southwestern Minnesota, sharing a call with her spouse, David Engelstad. In addition to her regular column, “Amen,” in the magazine *Gather*, she edited the e-book, *How Much is Enough—A Deeper Look at Stewardship in an Age of Abundance*. She authored the “Genesis” Bible study for *The Book of Faith* series. She and David give thanks for their grown daughters and are grateful their grandchildren live close by. **Wilbert “Wilk” Miller** lives with his wife, Dagmar, in Essex, Connecticut, a small New England village on the Connecticut River. Prior to retirement, he served downtown and inner-city churches in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., San Diego, and New York City; he also served a congregation in suburban Philadelphia. He now volunteers to help maintain parks and trails in Essex. **John Rollefson** is a familiar friend in these pages. An ELCA pastor, he has served urban and campus ministries in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, and Los Angeles, plus interims in Solvang and London. John’s books *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary (Years A, B and C)* are wonderful resources for preachers. John and his wife, Ruth, live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church. **Andrea Roske-Metcalf** is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. She and her spouse accepted a call in December to serve as co-coordinators of the ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission program in Nepal. They sold their home in Minneapolis quickly, but their departure was derailed first by visa delays and then by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the interim, they’ve been splitting time between their parents’ homes in the Twin Cities and Tucson, and homeschooling their two daughters. They trust that they’ll get to Kathmandu eventually. **Michael Wilker** is senior pastor of Lutheran Church of the Reformation on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. A graduate of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, he served as a parish pastor in California before becoming national director of Lutheran Volunteer Corps. Back in the parish, he finds it exhilarating and challenging to be a pastor and preacher close to the Capitol and the White House.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, Preaching Helps

2. Bradley Schmeling, sermon preached on Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2020 at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, St. Paul, Minn.

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost July 5, 2020

Zechariah 9:9–12

Psalm 145:8–14

Romans 7:15–25a

Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30

Engaging the Texts

Donkeys and oxen—it’s a beast of a Sunday! Zechariah’s prophetic word highlights the humble foal ridden by the divine warrior seeking peace and restoration in post-exilic Judah and Ephraim. Typically held within the confines of Palm Sunday, today’s reading from Hebrew scriptures highlights that the donkey’s pasture extends beyond our palm processions. Jesus, for his part, uses the metaphor of an oxen yoke as an invitation to come alongside him to receive respite for the weary soul. These beasts of burden become lasting symbols in the imagination of God’s people to the unconventional ways God’s eschatological promise is realized in our midst, now.

The covenantal promise to the Israelites binds God to act, yet again, for the sake of their wellbeing and welfare. Upending militaristic markers of victory, the triumph paraded in to the shouts of joy in Zechariah clings to the shaggy back of a donkey. Somehow this docile beast and its rider signal to the people that the battle-bow will be cut off, chariots and war-horses will be rendered useless, and peace will be commanded to all nations. God acts and liberation happens: “Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope: today I declare that I will restore to you double” (Zech 9:12). Symbolically, the ordinary beast becomes the vehicle of the extraordinary promise.

And so it is with Jesus. Matthew’s gospel shares Jesus’ words that have comforted generations. Like you, I know these words can be a balm when prayed over an anxious teenager or declared graveside to a grieving family: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). Like a steady ox, Jesus saddles up beside us readying his yoke to share. The imperative invitation from Jesus to “take my yoke” reveals a gentle helper who is able and willing to carry the heaviness of our hearts. Just as an oxen yoke distributes weight to make plowing easier for the pair, so, too, Jesus’ words and real presence distribute the heaviness carried by the human soul. In all humility, Jesus likens himself to the everyday ox as one who can bear the burdens we carry every day.

But let us not forget, as soft and furry as these creatures might appear, donkeys and oxen are ultimately beasts of burden. Even in these texts offering peace and rest, the weight

of God’s promises are still back-borne. These beasts may be steadfast and humble in their duties, but their primary function is bearing the heft of it all. So, what does it mean to be recipients of and participants in the humility and gentleness of the yoke of God? To share in the burden of Christ and with the community?

Pastoral Reflections

Donkeys and oxen are humble creatures, indeed. Perhaps these texts call for a sermon on humility in these days—humility for white America. Humility in naming white supremacy and America’s great sin of racism; humility yoked to repentance and reparations as white America listens to the cries of people of color pleading for justice and transformation in the wake of George Floyd’s death in Minneapolis at the hands of a white police officer; humility as the church seeks to live out the gospel knowing we have failed again and again to address the economic and racial disparities in our communities and institutions; humility to be open for the sake of the neighbor.

I’m sorry to say, but when I look to the national political stage in the United States, humility appears to be in short supply. What is more, amid this weekend’s Fourth of July fervor and grandiose celebrations—though likely muted slightly due to coronavirus—we will be reminded with fanfare and fireworks of our national self-centeredness, puffed-up militaristic pride, false equivalency of Christianity and nationalism, and a sociological machine entrenched in white supremacy. I cannot think of a single act that captures this point more in recent days than this: <https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/06/02/donald-trump-church-photo-op-george-floyd-protest-bash-pkg-vpx-es.cnn>.³ This was the moment on June 1, when President Trump ordered the clearing of peaceful protestors crying out for racial justice. In his effort to assert power and domination, President Trump then posed for a photo-op clutching a Bible in front of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Lafayette Square. This is the antithesis of humility needed now as people yearn for racial justice, healing, reconciliation, and systemic change.

We would do well to lift up the biblical virtue of humility espoused in Colossians 3:12: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” Or in Jesus’ words further in Matthew’s gospel, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (23:12). Preach humility to white America and let the donkey and oxen lead the way! The burden is upon those of us shrouded in white privilege. The yoke of Christ gifts and calls us to be in community together as part of the whole body. Plowing the fields of authentic community in Christ is a humble walk

3. Accessed June 2, 2020.

of self and communal reflection/repentance, mutual support, selflessness, and shared service in love.

It is past time for white America to bear the burden of our own sin, to follow the path of justice, and walk in humility with our black, brown, and indigenous siblings sharing the yoke of Christ. We can only do this together; we can only do this if we listen to the cries of all of God's beloved; we can only do this through Christ Jesus who beckons us to share his yoke—gentleness and humility, to be sure. But sharing the burden together so that all—all!—may in Christ Jesus find rest for our souls.

Justin Lind-Ayres

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost July 12, 2020

Isaiah 55:10–13

Psalms 65:9–13

Romans 8:1–11

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

Engaging the Texts

Isaiah's invitation to abundant life begins like a town-crier bellowing on the streets: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!" The verbs calling for our attention are scattered throughout this chapter: "come," "listen," "incline your ear," "see," "seek." Once the prophet has captured our ear and eye with the richness of God's bounty, our bodies are readied to digest the marrow of the promise: as the heaven-sent rain and snow water the earth and give "seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth" (10–11).

Images collide throughout this chapter as God's word is depicted as both the source of growth—*rain* that waters the *earth* and the *seed* planted therein—as well as that which grows on account of the source including *wine*, *milk*, *bread*, and *food* of delight. Within this jumble of fecund imagery, the hearers and seers of the prophet's proclamation are invited to know the word of God that gives life, sustains life, and, ultimately, is life. So much so that creation itself testifies to this truth, for the mountains burst into song and the trees clap their hands bearing witness to this teeming word of life!

In this lectionary pairing, Isaiah readies the ground for Jesus' "parable of the sower" in Matthew 13. "Listen!" Like the prophet's emphatic cry, Jesus compels the crowd to settle in and pay heed to what he has to say. He then launches into a story of a reckless sower/farmer who throws seeds everywhere: on paths, on rocky ground, and amid thorns. In this

haphazard seed-sowing venture, some seed somehow makes it to good soil. Though the farming practices of this sower are suspect, the seed that does find its way to fertile dirt brought forth grain to a hundredfold. Here is another biblical harvest image that speaks to the generative power of God's word!

This image is solidified in Jesus' explanation of the parable later in the chapter: "[T]his is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit." The life-giving reception of God's word stands in contrast to the seed snatched, withered, or choked by the evils of this world within and around us. Life must always contend with death and God's word knows this contentious relationship well. After all, the Word—the source that nourishes all life as well as the produce itself—was buried deep in the soil. After three days, the seed and the source burst from the earth bearing abundant, resurrected life for us all. So much so, that mountains and trees (Isaiah 55), pastures and hills and meadows and valleys (Psalm 65), "sing and shout together for joy!" And we join the song.

Pastoral Reflections

If I could add an addendum to Jesus' parable, it would be based on my backyard experience of *Glechoma hederacea*, often called "ground-ivy" or "creeping charlie." Though *Glechoma hederacea* has been used medicinally and for brewing ales, in my backyard it is an invasive species. Classified by many as a weed, creeping charlie when left unchecked can take over yards and woodland areas. I contend with it in my backyard every year as it is nigh impossible to eradicate. It will continue to creep along if left to its own devices. So, I would humbly add to Jesus' parable: "Some seed fell on good soil and grew into productive grain fields, but the fields were left unattended and *Glechoma hederacea* (or your weed of choice) slowly and methodically took over until no fruit was to be found."

Admittedly, my little addendum is really an amalgamation of a few of Jesus' sower-seed examples, but I do think it has a nuance all its own. I believe the human heart is fertile ground for the fruits of love and unity and peace to bloom. But it takes constant attention, nourishment, and work to thrive, much like a flourishing garden or a lush, grassy backyard. God's word as source and seed is constantly rooting itself within us growing and ripening with the very fruits of the Spirit. But the incessant creeping of fear and distrust of the other seeks to spoil the good soil of our hearts. We see this in the never-ceasing creep of societal systems of oppression and division based upon othering people. In recent days, the coronavirus revealed bigotry toward Asian Americans and the death of George Floyd exposed again the deep spread of white supremacy in our own backyard. Like weeds infiltrating the earth, fear of the other gets a stranglehold upon our lives. And fear is ultimately what kills and leads to death.

We need the reckless love of God sown within us again and again; we need the relentless work of God upon our hearts to stave off the weeds that are prone to creep their way in. We need each other to share in this love-work so that life—the very life of Christ Jesus—may bloom in us and the world. Pick your context for the scattering seed, be it gardening, farming, lawncare, greenhouse, etc. Whatever it is, it is a chore to nourish, sustain, and hold back that which kills. Neglect will be our ruin. But God is the God of life, and we hold fast to a generative word that promises to move us from fear to love, from division to unity, and from death to life.

As you preach on these earthy texts, ponder bringing in creation to assist you. As many of us worship virtually due to COVID-19, perhaps you record outside with seeds in hand. Or maybe you go to the community garden near your church together (socially distant) and preach knee-deep in vegetables, herbs, and fruit. Or if you are a part of a farming community, preach from the fields. Find a landscape bursting with life as your backdrop: trees clapping hands, mountains bursting in song, river or prairies or parks resonating with the music of creation. From there, may your mouth bring forth the word that leads to life in Christ. And may all listen with open hearts.

Justin Lind-Ayres

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 19, 2020

Isaiah 44:6–8

Psalms 86:11–17

Romans 8:12–25

Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

Engaging the Texts

The Isaiah text, from Second Isaiah, is directed to exiles for whom dislocation had inevitably caused disorientation. Who are we and how is God related to us now that we are strangers to ourselves, the culture in which we live, and the promises that were the foundation of our identity (land, progeny, fame)? The Romans text weighs into a congregational argument to try to shine a light on what it means to be children of God. What vision of self and community guides a Christ-following people? Even the Psalm seeks guidance. “Teach me your ways, O LORD,” precedes a witness to God’s saving love.

The Gospel text from Matthew is well aligned with these same yearnings, but turns to a didactic allegory to help frame the discussion. Note the either/or way of engaging the learning, particularly in the Romans text and the parable and its interpretation in Matthew. A binary lens is helpful only briefly, to try to distinguish the edges of the argument, but it’s

important to note that such dualism is generally not helpful in holding respectful space for the complexity of human life and community.

That said, Matthew’s parable prompts questions that can help open a more nuanced look at the text. Begin with the characters in the parable:

- **A sower**, who turns out to be an owner of land (householder) and of people (slaves). This master was the one who sowed the seed, not the slaves who normally would have. Slave owning was not unusual, but needs to be seen as an element of this story. Given that the householder was a slave owner, why didn’t the slaves sow the good seed?
- **The slaves** of the householder were the ones who noticed the weeds growing among the wheat and offered to address the problem immediately by pulling the weeds. They are instructed to wait and let them grow together until harvest. Why? Normally, the weeds would have been tackled right away.
- **The enemy** who sowed “bad” seed. For those of us who are not horticulturalists, this was likely dandelion, a common plant that looks very much like wheat until it produces seed heads at the end of its growth cycle. How did the enemy manage to sow this bad seed?
- **The reapers**, who are called upon to do the harvesting. They are instructed to distinguish between weed and wheat, burning the weeds and gathering the wheat into the householder’s barn.

Matthew presents not just the parable, but also the “key” to the allegory. Most questions are addressed when the explanation is offered. It reveals that the householder is none other than the Son of Man, the enemy is the devil, and the plants are either children of God or children of the devil.

Pastoral Reflections

This dualism, in our day, borders on dangerous. It is in our nature as human beings to want to know that we are in the right, which can most easily be established by calling out and identifying those who are wrong. There is no more easily established bond between people than a common enemy. It is not a durable bond, but as long as the enemy is in focus, it will hold.

For teaching, we can offer the distinction, but for living, we must acknowledge that “hard-and-fast” just isn’t sufficient. So Paul can offer to the Romans the distinction between the spirit of slavery in contrast to the spirit of adoption. We can realize that adoption is the more life-giving orientation. But we must also know that each of us carries both. In light of our baptismal identity and adopted identity as children of God, we will spend our lives recognizing both in our heart of

hearts and working to at least feed the spirit of adoption so it can show up more often as a guide to our deliberations and decision-making!

Similarly, Matthew's hard line between what is good and what is bad is helpful for seeing the edges of the continuum, but the real work of life is living in between. The seemingly easy resolve in Jesus' explanation to the parable does not have to extinguish our curiosity about the parable itself. Particularly in these days, particularly for those of us who are white, the ability to question our circumstances could not be more important if we yearn to be counted among the children of God. That the weed and wheat were very similar is important.

The white bias in our economic and cultural systems is well documented and profound. Hauling spoils of war into exile from homelands, whether from traditional tribal territory to reservation or from one continent to another; stripping away and outlawing markers of identity and culture; disenfranchising those thought to be "less than" through forced labor or the destruction of ecosystems; sanctioning terroristic laws and behaviors (lynching, mass-incarceration, harassment by citizens or law enforcement, etc.), and creating persistent roadblocks to generational wealth building are all features of the culture in which some of us thrive and others languish.

White people must have the courage to tell our stories with the nuance of oppression included, whether we have been conscious of enforcing that oppression or not. This is a very difficult thing. We must learn to recognize the weeds within ourselves and within the systems that likely have benefited us.

Simultaneously, we can also stand in the promise of baptism, claiming our place as children of God, even in this time, when our weedy-ness is being revealed to us. We have been adopted. We can be good seed. We can do this very hard work to be co-creators with our siblings of color and with the God who made us all. Together, we can re-imagine a world where all are welcome at God's table of mercy and justice.

Catherine Malotky

Mary Magdalene, Apostle July 22, 2020

Ruth 1:6–18

Psalm 73:23–28

Acts 13:26–33a

John 20:1–2, 11–18

Engaging the Texts

The lectionary texts for the feast of Mary Magdalene, Apostle tap stories about two wonderful biblical women, and a powerful, this-includes-everyone oration by Paul. Each of these texts center on foundational questions about the meaning of inclusion and our place in the story of salvation.

We are presented with the very beginning of the story of Ruth, framed by the common biblical experience of food insecurity. Naomi and her husband leave their hometown, Bethlehem (literally "house of bread") due to famine. They find sustenance among the Moabites, long disdained by the chosen people, linked to them through an incestuous bond between ancestor Lot and his virgin daughters whom he offered to surrender to the rape-minded mob in Sodom (Genesis 19:4-8, 30-37). Naomi's sons marry Moabite women and all is well until it is not. Her husband dies, and soon after both of her sons. As widows, they were vulnerable in cultures where women were primarily seen as property of the men to whom they belonged. Widows lived outside of the mainstream economic system, a precarious position they shared with foreigners and orphans. So, Naomi chose to return to her hometown, no doubt hoping she would find a way among extended family to sustain herself. Ruth, in an ironic turn, chooses to link herself to her mother-in-law, in spite of the disadvantage of her ethnic identity. Naomi and Ruth become family. The story plays out beyond this point, but at this point we see two women risking all for a chance at security and safety—for salvation.

The Acts text recalls a powerful oration by the Apostle Paul, where he deftly weaves a connection between the long traditions held dear by many of his synagogue listeners in Antioch and the gospel story entrusted to him of Jesus as Savior. These particular verses do not appear in the regular cycle of Sunday texts, only for this festival of Mary Magdalene, Apostle. Paul established his shared identity, framing an argument that explained the rejection of Jesus by the Jerusalem community. They could not see the signs or understand the words of the prophets, he proposed, and they turned Jesus over to be killed. "But God raised him from the dead," Paul preached, an answer to the promises made to their common ancestors. Jesus is the one.

Finally, we read the early verses of the John's Easter story.

Mary Magdalene risked going out before it was light (the synoptic gospels place the story at dawn) to find his tomb and make sense of the chaos of the last days. She finds it empty. Three times in this short narrative she repeats, “I do not know where they have laid him.” She struggled to make sense of what she was experiencing. Her tears are justified, in spite of being questioned, but the question is larger than the moment. Before she recognized him, Jesus asked “Whom are you looking for?” When he spoke her name, she recognized him and consequently became the first person to bring the gospel news to others that Jesus, in ascending to God, was opening the intimacy of his relationship with God to her and all others.

If you haven’t done so in a while, it would be worth debunking the long-held notion that Mary was a prostitute who repented. Biblical information about Mary of Magdala is scant, and her story has been embellished and discredited any number of times in the course of Christian history. From this text, it is clear she was close to Jesus, and worthy carrier of the gospel message.

Pastoral Reflections

Now millennia later, we can wonder what the elixir of salvation was for the people who clung to promises in the context of their faith. Why were these events or stories salvific? Who are we looking for? Frankly, the formula “Jesus died on the cross to take my sins away” just doesn’t have the punch it once did when we Europeans lived in fear of eternal damnation (other cultures had other terrors). While some Christians still do, for most mainline Christians earning a place in heaven is no longer an organizing principle.

Yet, just because we can theologially assert “grace by faith,” that doesn’t mean we are rescued from our incessant need to measure up. Our score-keeping instincts are baked into our DNA. Ancestors who could not distinguish friend from foe never reproduced. Now our xenophobic propensities, once so useful for survival, are counter-productive in an over-crowded world where playing well with different others is a survival skill rather than a nice-to-have.

Mary Magdalene, Ruth before her, and even Paul, the Roman Jew who evangelized Gentiles, were each an affront to much that was perceived to be stabilizing and complete. Ruth, the *Moabite*, shows up in Jesus’ family tree. Mary Magdalene, a woman, is the one Jesus comes to first, and is the first to carry the news of his rising to the disciples. Paul, once a persecutor of the faithful, promotes the radical idea that Jesus is for all people, not just the ones who understand themselves to be chosen.

God, in Jesus, can choose any of us, and does. This might be the counter-cultural message that our world, and we, need now. Our story and God’s story are intimately connected and, in Jesus’ rising, unable to be rent, even by death. We belong.

We matter. Rejoicing in that welcome, we work for a world where everyone else matters too.

Catherine Malotky

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost July 26, 2020

1 Kings 3:5–12

Psalm 119:129–136

Romans 8:26–39

Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

When Jesus told his parables of the kingdom, he didn’t talk about streets lined with gold or pearly gates stretching forever (admittedly, he did mention one tiny pearl). Jesus announced that the inbreaking of the kingdom occurs before our eyes, in the everyday nooks and crannies of life, in things easily overlooked like bushes and leaven, fields and solitary pearls. Who would dare describe the kingdom of heaven so unceremoniously, comparing it to a measly mustard seed that, at its greatest, becomes a big bush?

These kingdom parables call to mind Article VII of the *Augsburg Confession*: “It is taught among us that one holy catholic church...is the assembly of all believers, among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.” That’s a fancy Lutheran way of declaring the kingdom is encountered as we tell the stories of God’s love the best we are able, share chunks of bread and sips of wine, and baptize with water from the sacristy spigot. How peculiar to glimpse God’s presence in such trifling stuff.

The kingdom of heaven is LIKE. Parables stretch our minds in bewildering ways sometimes causing us to sound like skateboarding teenagers trying to explain the inexplicable: “Like...like uh...you know...the kingdom of heaven is like.”

In the middle of Sunday’s sermon, preachers might invite worshipers to turn to one another and answer, “What is the kingdom of heaven like?” There will likely be awkward silences, humiliating hesitations, and lots of “you know, like uh, well, like,” but that is the point: the kingdom of heaven is God made manifest to damaged and sinful people gathered around mangled words, plastic disks of bread, and rot gut wine purchased at the corner drug store—no wonder it causes us to stumble and bumble.

One thing is for certain, when Jesus described the kingdom of heaven, he didn’t grab his *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* or dust off some weighty theological tome. Precision has its place but, in today’s parables, Jesus fires off four *likes* in a row, opting to let mystery and imagination hold sway. These parables irresistibly invite us to locate holy won-

der in ordinary things where we might never have thought to look.

To my mind, few writers are better at teaching us how to uncover holiness in the humdrum than Annie Dillard. For example, examining our worship practices, she writes: “A high school stage play is more polished than this service we have been rehearsing since the year one. In two thousand years, we have not worked out the kinks. We positively glorify them. Week after week we witness the same miracle: that God, for reasons unfathomable, refrains from blowing our dancing bear act to smithereens.”⁴

We often expect the kingdom to appear with blinking neon lights. Most congregations’ Facebook pages and websites include prominent pictures of packed sanctuaries teeming with lilies and cherry blossoms or poinsettias and pine trees. My inexact research posits these pictures were taken on Easter or Christmas. If a picture tells a thousand words, we yearn for huge congregations. In all fairness, what church uses a picture taken on a sweltering Sunday during the extra-liturgical season of “Beachtide”? Startlingly, Jesus does, stirring us to imagine the kingdom appearing when the church is nearly empty on July 26.

The problem, of course, is that many of our communities of faith suffer from inferiority complexes, feeling overshadowed by the likes of St. Peter’s in Rome, Saint Paul’s in London, and T. J. Jakes’ Potter’s House in Dallas. Such colossal places can cause congregational members to grumble because we harbor similar dreams of numerical triumph that remain unfulfilled. We fear the churches we have loved and committed so much to over the years will soon be bereft of Christ’s presence—after all, doesn’t Jesus have better places to be than our ecclesiastical mustard seed hangouts?

Jesus’ kingdom parables offer invaluable training for those seduced into supposing bigger is better. We are often hoodwinked into believing that if we are innovative, entrepreneurial, hard-working, and winsome enough, our mundane places will prosper like giant sequoias and colossal bakeries. Jesus claimed, however, that birds make their nests in paltry shrubs and 100 people are fed from a smidgen of leaven that begins the baking process—and that is enough (*satis est* said the reformers)...Oh yes, and our savior is a carpenter’s son from rinky-dink Nazareth and his mother’s name is Mary.

If only we gaze from the corners of our eyes, we might find ourselves telling others about the presence of the kingdom: “At our little church with only 118 members, we feed hundreds of hungry people every week and we unfailingly take God’s good news to our lonely and bedridden siblings in Christ who anguish with little or no hope.”

Yes, our life together can feel quite mediocre at times; and

4. Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1982), 20.

yet, Jesus claims it is in the midst of such pedestrian goings-on that God inspires us to proclaim “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39). Yes indeed, this is enough!

Wilk Miller

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost August 2, 2020

Isaiah 55: 1–5

Psalm 145:8–9, 14–21

Romans 9:1–5

Matthew 14:13–21

The feeding of the 5,000, besides women and children, is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. This unforgettable occurrence immediately follows the beheading of Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist.

What good times the two boys must have had together. Imagine them skipping to the synagogue, merrily singing Isaiah’s words, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” What a thrill to grow up with the cousin you adore. Jesus’ grief must have been unbearable upon receiving the heartbreaking news that John had been beheaded by the brutish minions of cruel Herod. All he wanted to do was go to a lonely place, sit under the stars, and reach out for God’s heavenly consolation.

Jesus’ solitude ended quickly. No sooner had he gotten off the boat than the crowds came running and swarmed around him. They knew he could heal their mother’s COVID and cure the wretched racism that infects our nation. Jesus was exhausted but frantic people needed him. The weary disciples sought to protect Jesus from the frantic throngs. They said to him: “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves” (Matt 14:15).

Jesus refused to let the needy be turned away. The masses’ hunger was his hunger; their sadness and tears, his as well. Jesus said to the well-intentioned disciples, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat” (Matt 14:16).

The feeding of the 5,000 tickles the fancy of young and old alike and the grand finale maybe more so: when everyone had eaten, there were still twelve baskets of broken pieces remaining.

To my mind, the most stunning occurrence that day was not necessarily the miraculous feeding but rather that Jesus

took the time to shower hungry hearts with compassion when what he so needed was to be alone in prayer.

Henri Nouwen instilled in us who were divinity school students that the interruptions are often when the most important ministry occurs.

You have experienced the interruptions. You are trying to finish Sunday's sermon early so you can relax on Saturday when you hear someone knocking on your office door. When you open, there stands a sorry soul whimpering for a few seconds of your time. Seconds stretch into hours as you rush him off to the local detox center. You return home exhausted. You go to bed and at three in the morning, you hear a curly haired little girl scamper down the hallway and snuggle into bed next to you. You are as quiet as can be until she whispers, "Mommy, tell me a story."

Yes, indeed, extraordinary ministry often occurs amid the interruptions and inconveniences.

Soon after I began my ministry at First Lutheran Church-San Diego, two officials from the Center City Development Corporation came to ask me about our considerable social service ministry to homeless and underserved people. I had heard they were intent on making us obtain a permit (read: get rid of homeless people downtown!). Their first words, "Do you feed people here?" I asked, "Are you inspecting all churches that serve food?" They said, "Yes." I then asked, "Are you examining St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Cathedral across the street?" "No," they said, "they don't feed." I responded, "You mean they don't serve bread and wine at Sunday Mass?" "That is not the kind of feeding we are talking about," they replied. I said, "That is the kind of feeding I'm talking about! Write this down: every meal we serve here, whether in the sanctuary or on the patio, is a holy meal from God."

It is tempting to separate holy meals from everyday meals. We are often programmed to believe holiness occurs only within the church's four walls on Sunday morning and certainly not at a free weekday meal served on the church patio.

Jesus did not play the holy-secular game. For Jesus, all life is holy.

"Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples and the disciples gave them to the crowds." This occurred out in the countryside and yet we hear the identical words in the sanctuary at Sunday Eucharist. It appears Jesus deems all meals holy.

People often ask, "Is there a special wine to be used for Holy Communion?" The question assumes there is a special sanctified wine with Presiding Bishop Eaton's visage embossed on the bottle along with the ELCA logo.

Annie Dillard writes of buying Communion wine for her little church: "How can I buy the communion wine? Who am I to buy the communion wine? Shouldn't I be wearing robes...Are there holy grapes, is there holy ground, is any-

thing here holy? There are no holy grapes, there is not holy ground, nor is there anyone but us."⁵

The women who came knocking at our church doors meant no harm. They did as so many people do, confining holiness to the room with altar and candles, pulpit and font. Our ministry, on the other hand, is to let holiness burst forth beyond the church walls, carrying the loaves and fish out into God's groaning world.

Wilk Miller

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost August 9, 2020

1 Kings 19:9-18

Psalm 85:8-13

Romans 10:5-15

Matthew 14:22-33

The story of Jesus walking on the water follows the miracle of the Feeding of the 5000 in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John. All three stories start similarly. Jesus puts his disciples in a boat to go ahead of him. While on the water, a strong wind comes up and the disciples spend the night being battered by waves. Meanwhile Jesus goes off by himself to pray.

In the morning, after a terrible night being thrown about in the boat, the disciples see Jesus walking across the water toward them. They are terrified! What is this—a ghost?! Jesus tries to calm them saying, *Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.*

But they *are* afraid. They're exhausted, perhaps seasick, and probably still confused about the great picnic that preceded it all—and here's their leader, calmly walking across the water toward them as if nothing has happened, as if there's nothing unusual about taking a stroll out on the water. *Do not be AFRAID?! What is going on?*

The Gospel of Matthew is the only gospel to include Peter walking on the water as well. *If it's you*, Peter says (a test?), *command me to come to you on the water!* Jesus says, *Come!* Peter starts out and he walks on water until the wind kicks up again—then he starts to sink. He calls out to Jesus, *Save me!* Jesus reaches out his hand and pulls Peter out of the choppy waves. *You of little faith...* Jesus says to Peter.

It sounds like a reprimand at first. But we must remember that in Matthew's Gospel, a "little faith" goes a long way. (Matt 8:26, 13:31, 17:20).

Why did you doubt? Jesus asks. The Greek behind that word *doubt* is an interesting one—*distazo*. It's used in the Easter story in Matthew, too. In both stories, scholars suggest it

5. Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 63-64.

might best be translated using words denoting vacillation, not necessarily skepticism. Peter *wavers*—maybe even distracts himself—and that’s what leads to his sinking.

In any event, as soon as Jesus says *Why did you doubt?* the wind dies down and the disciples recognize him as the Son of God. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus gets in the boat with them, the disciples are astounded, and we’re told their hearts are hardened. In John’s Gospel, the disciples want to take Jesus in the boat, and immediately they hit land, their destination. But in the Gospel of Matthew, the events cause the disciples to fall down and worship Jesus. The story ends in faith-filled confession.

So what is the writer of Matthew doing here? What’s the point this gospel writer is trying to make? Something is being said about faith it seems—but what exactly?

Perhaps things grow clearer when we look at this Gospel text alongside the other texts the lectionary appoints for the day. The First Lesson is the story of the beleaguered and battered Elijah hiding out in a cave after his victory over the priests of Baal at Mount Carmel. He’s sure he’s the only faithful one left, though God goes to some length to convince him otherwise. There are earthquakes and winds and fires—but God’s voice comes to Elijah not in those awe-inspiring events, but in the “sheer silence” that follows. (This was translated “still small voice” in the RSV, a translation I still love.) The message is both implied and literal—God is always present, but that presence may look different than what we expect. Smaller, perhaps. (Though no less powerful!) Softer, maybe. Less obvious, often. More—subtle? But what’s sure is this: that divine presence—however small, soft, and subtle it might be—is always good. And always there. We can count on this.

The day’s psalm, Psalm 85, is a prayer of deliverance from national adversity, an oracle of assurance, really. *Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss... The Lord will give what is good! Good is who God is!*

The Gospel appointed for the tenth Sunday after Pentecost joins these texts as a story of assurance. The disciples are still learning—as are we, this generation’s disciples of “little faith.” What if faith in this story is believing that God is in the boat when Jesus’ disciples are being tossed about, battered by waves, pummeled by a storm? At the start of this story it seems like Jesus has left his disciples—he sends them off in the boat on their own. But one of the things that happens as the story plays out is that they learn God’s presence is always with them, that their “little faith” is, in fact, enough. Little faiths is what Jesus works with and what God specializes in.

We preachers with our little faiths are called, the Apostle Paul says in the day’s reading from Romans, to spread this very good news of God’s steadfast presence and unconditional love. We must let people know that their little faiths, their wavering beliefs, are backed by divine constancy and love. How will they know unless we tell them the stories, proclaim

the goodness of God, invite them to enter into all that God is doing?

Melanie Heuiser Hill

Mary, Mother of Our Lord August 15, 2020

Isaiah 61:7–11

Psalm 34:1–9

Galatians 4:4–7

Luke 1:46–55

The amazing storylines of Elizabeth and Mary converge in the second half of Chapter 1 in the Gospel of Luke. It’s a breathtaking way to start the Gospel narrative—entirely unique to Luke’s Gospel. Right away we know that things are changing—the story practically prickles with energy.

To begin with, Elizabeth, old and childless, is pregnant, which carries all of the overtones of Sarah and Abraham and the divine promises made to them so many generations before. And then, when her young cousin Mary comes for a visit, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaps, and Elizabeth *knows* something astounding is happening. She is filled with the Holy Spirit and sings out, *Blessed are you among women! Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*

And with that introduction, Mary sings. There’s a context larger than these two women, though, that must be remembered. There’s the Roman occupation, with all of its political, social, and religious implications. Also, Mary and Elizabeth—because they were poor women—had very bleak futures. Mary is especially vulnerable—she faces possible stoning as an unwed teenage mother. Yet instead of being paralyzed by (understandable!) fear, Mary *sings!* She sings to God through her tears—believing that the baby growing inside of her is the beginning of a new future for all God’s people. She sings about justice, mercy, love, grace, and redemption. Her words pick up the themes of the prophets—today’s Isaiah text and Psalm 34 use some of the very same themes and even words when talking about God’s steadfast and everlasting presence and love.

Mary declares that the effects of the Lord’s coming are coming for all people. This echoes the promises to Israel through the generations. No wonder the Magnificat has been banned in times and places where such words and visions are feared—most notably in India, Guatemala, and Argentina. Mary’s song of praise and radical faith has long been uplifted by those who make demands of their oppressors—and *insist God is on the side of the oppressed*—during times of conflict and suffering. The Magnificat has been considered entirely

too subversive by oppressors of many regimes.⁶

And yet—we sing this song so calmly, read these words so evenly. For centuries we’ve read and sung these words in private devotion and public worship. We’ve often tried to tame the Magnificat, soften it—especially at Christmas time (it’s the text for Advent IV in years B and C.) This is the longest set of words spoken by a woman in the New Testament. Mary goes on and on about God overturning everything—the claims she makes are as outrageous as the situation she finds herself in—and we too often read through it as if we’re reading a children’s nursery rhyme. We would do well to recover the sense of urgency and subversiveness that flow through these words.

Notice the past tense verbs. The Mighty One *has done* great things for me! God *has shown* strength...he *has scattered* the proud, *has brought down* the powerful from their thrones. God *has lifted up* the lowly and *has filled* the hungry with good things. Just as God *has helped* the Israelites, just as God promised Sarah and Abraham, just as God has always done... God is with *us*, helping *us*. It *has* been done. It *is* being done. It *will be* done.

In this song, we are swept across history with Mary into God’s activity to save and redeem this world. Just as God has done, God is doing even today! *This* is what made the power-brokers in Guatemala sweat—just like King Herod.

God takes what is small and insignificant in the eyes of the world—a poor, unwed, young girl—and sets about to do something extraordinary. Mary sings out: *My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior. God is good. God is doing something amazing and turning our world inside out and upside down. What our world shuns, God lifts up. What our world prizes, God despises.*

This is the wrestling and reckoning of a remarkable young woman wanting to make things clear for herself. Mary’s heart is stirred up with this pregnancy—just like the ancient prayers of Advent. *Stir up our hearts, oh Lord...!*

We live in a world that is anxious and afraid—only the details change over the years. The themes stay largely the same. The struggles between the powerful and the powerless, the rich and the poor, continue to be the root of most of the world’s problems. God is ever at work in the muck and yuck of this. In our new particulars, God shows up, ready to work with us for justice and redemption for all.

In our particular time and place—I wonder—what do we sing and pray about, talk about, work toward, watch and hope for? With what do we wrestle and reckon? What do we believe? Why? What stories do we tell? What beliefs do we hold dear? Which ones do we share? Where is God in all of it?

6. <https://kairoscenter.org/sermons-bible-studies-liturgies/politics-christmas-roman-empire/marys-magnificat-luke-146-55/>.

Mary sang the Magnificat with her whole life and being.
What song shall *we* sing?

Melanie Heuiser Hill

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost August 16, 2020

Isaiah 56:1, 6–8

Psalm 67

Romans 11:1–2a, 29–32

Matthew 15:[10-20], 21–28

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us.

—Psalm 67:1

Eunuchs Too!

“Get rid of her,” they begged him. “Tell her to go away and let us alone. She just won’t stop bothering us.” But Jesus didn’t seem to want to be bothered either and muttered: “I was sent only to the lost lambs of Israel.” However, being a woman not about to be put off by a few dismissive words by a snotty Galilean, especially where her daughter’s welfare was concerned, she pushed through the protecting ring of disciples, fell on her knees and pleaded shamelessly in her own “*kyrie eleison*,” “Son of David have mercy on me” (vv 22–24).

Now, finally, he turned to give his full attention to this obstinate, obstreperous Canaanite woman—a descendent of those Baal-worshipping neighbors and hereditary enemies of the Jews we encountered in last week’s story about Elijah—and nastily, if teasingly, rebuked her with words reminiscent of a proverb of old King Solomon: “It isn’t fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (v 26). Oh, how the disciples must have relished that!

Jesus finally laying down the law to this impertinent woman who like so many were always pestering Jesus with their private complaints. But the nameless woman didn’t miss a beat. She didn’t go slinking away like the “bitch” that Jesus, in effect, had called her. Nor did she start ranting and raving at this snooty Jew with his air of Hebrew superiority as God’s specially chosen.

Instead she calmly—with no little display of native wit—took hold of the proverb thrown at her and craftily turned it back upon the rabbi, quipping in what I hear as mock servility: “Yes sir, it isn’t fair to throw the children’s bread to the dogs.” “But you have to admit,” and here I see the slightest smirk, or was it a sneer, turning up the corners of her mouth as she continued, “yet even the dogs”—meaning, the “bitch and her puppies”—“eat the crumbs that fall from

their masters' table." Then, only then, with what I imagine had to be a big smile spreading across his face, Jesus turned to the woman, raised her to her feet, and exclaimed loudly so that all could hear—especially his disciples—"O woman, magnificent is your faith." And her daughter, Matthew our Gospel writer reports, almost as an afterthought, "was healed instantly" (vv 27–28).

Can you imagine the looks on the disciples' faces as this sassy, pagan woman, this "dogged" lady, seemed to get the better of Jesus right before their eyes and coaxed a miracle out of him? So far as I know it's the only place in scripture where Jesus is defeated in dialogue, even if he seems to have been colluding in his own defeat. This story strikes me in my spiritual funny bone, for the disciples—and we contemporary disciples—turn out to be the butts of the joke. Heightening the humor is the fact that Jesus' declaration: "Woman, great is your faith," comes hot on the heels of last week's rebuke of Peter when Jesus had said in disgust, "You of little faith, why did you doubt" (14:31)?

What I find so compelling about this story is not just the witty repartee between the woman and Jesus. Even better is how Jesus strings the disciples along by himself playing the part they want him to play, seeming to express their traditional ethnic and religious and gender prejudice, and then cannily turning it on them at the end by embracing the woman and commending her "magnificent" faith. In the excluding behavior of the disciples we're meant to see mirrored our own excluding behaviors, our own tendencies as disciples of Jesus to protect ourselves from outsiders and our desire "to be healed" of such persistent "intruders" upon our own spiritual time with Jesus.

Behind our gospel story lie all kinds of other stories from scripture that witness to how God meets us in those liminal, boundary situations or encounters with "the other" where we are least at ease. Who knows why, but those who've chosen our three-year lectionary readings decided to omit the very verses that get most uncomfortably specific about who the excluded ones referred to in our Isaiah lection really are. Besides the "foreigners" who are mentioned in our reading, the excised verses declare: "For thus says the Lord, to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off" (vv 4–5). Ouch! Hebrew pun intended, I expect. This, we need to appreciate, is a prophetic word of inclusion extended to a group that was explicitly excluded in the Hebrew law from joining in worship, in this case a prophetic word trumping an older, long-established prohibition (see also Acts 8, the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in his chariot reading the prophet Isaiah just a few turns of the scroll before today's lection!).

Eunuchs are no longer the excluded sexual minority suffering discrimination in church and society. But we know who are.

John Rollefson

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost August 23, 2020

Isaiah 51:1–6

Psalm 138

Romans 12:1–8

Matthew 16:13–20

I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart;
Before the gods I sing your praise....

—Psalm 138:1

Petros/Rocky

In this presidential election year, it is timely to be reminded by our Gospel reading that preference polls have an origin at least as long ago as Jesus' time. "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Jesus asks. Opinions vary, his disciples reported. "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Some sort of prophet seems to have been the general consensus. "But who do you say that I am?" (vv 13–15), Jesus then asks, turning from a request for mere reportage to an avowal of personal commitment.

Should we be surprised that it is Simon who boldly steps forward to utter the words that together with the ensuing story of the Transfiguration serves, scholars tell us, as a kind of hinge in Matthew's Gospel? For this is the turning point where Jesus turns his face to Jerusalem and the destiny that awaits him there. "You are Messiah," Simon confesses, "the Son of the living God" (v 16), a christological high point in Matthew concerning which Jesus urges secrecy upon his disciples while blessing Simon for his God-inspired outburst.

Now follow words of Jesus not found in the other synoptics that have bedeviled interpreters through the ages: "And I tell you, you are Peter (*petros*) and on this rock (*petra*) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." Words follow about Simon/Peter being given "the keys to the kingdom of heaven" (vv 18–19) which is the origin of subsequent Christian art's identification of Peter as the guy with the keys, numerous bad jokes in which Peter as heaven's doorman meets folks at the pearly gates, and the authority for binding and loosing about which our reading will have more to say in a couple of weeks.

"Church" (*ekklesia*) does seem an anachronistic intrusion of Matthew's into Jesus' own words, but the pun in Greek regarding Jesus' nicknaming of Peter strikes me as characteristic of Jesus' own well-developed sense of ironic humor. "*Petra*,"

the feminine-gendered Greek word for “rock” or “stone” here becomes the source of Jesus’ pet-name “*Petros*” for this impetuous, quick-silver disciple who will fail so miserably to live up to his new name in Jesus’ time of trial in Jerusalem and might better have been named “Sandy” than “Rocky.”

Peter will prove anything but a rock, but nonetheless, will serve as *de facto* leader of the twelve on their way to becoming “church.” The early traditions of the church in which Peter will eventually be martyred in Rome where he became the originating *episkopos*, see today’s Gospel as its scriptural authentication of Peter’s primacy as the “rock” on which Jesus established his church. Protestants have long argued that it is Peter’s confession of faith in him as Messiah to which Jesus is alluding as the rock on which the church is founded. More to the point, perhaps, is the truth that Peter, the once and future pope, whom Jesus at least three times in Matthew’s Gospel renames as “Rocky,” “Satan,” and “Stumbling Block,” (for the latter two namings see next week’s lection), on the eve of Jesus’ own crucifixion will go on to become his Master’s three-time denier as well. Yet this same leader with feet of clay (rather than granite!) will emerge on the other side of the resurrection as the far-from-perfect, yet chastened and truly tested, leader bequeathed to the church by Jesus himself.

Both the irony and wisdom of Jesus evident in today’s Gospel echo in our other texts as well. Take Second Isaiah’s counsel, for example, for God’s faithful (“you that pursue righteousness”) to go back to first principles and consider their origins. “Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug” (v 1) suggests an alternative metaphor (“chips off the old block?”) for the descendants of Abraham and Sarah including Peter, progeny promised to be as numerous as the stars sparkling in a dark, desert sky and grains of sand on the seashore. Remembering whose we are roots our summons to be light-bearers of the good news of what is variously called God’s “justice,” “salvation,” and “deliverance” (vv 4–5).

Rather than the rock imagery of our readings from Isaiah and Matthew for the *ekklesia* of the faithful, Paul invokes the organic image of the body which he has already used to good effect in his first Corinthian letter. Here he calls us to consider our calling as the body of Christ as an extended act of somatic worship, what the psalmist in attention-getting language called giving thanks and singing God’s praise “with my whole heart before the gods” (v 1) of this world. No longer “conformed to this world,” we offer up bodies and minds renewed and transformed by God to be members of Christ’s body, each functioning on behalf of all expressing a myriad of gifts in a multi-diversity of expressions. See Grundtvig’s oldie but goodie, “Built on a Rock” (*ELW* #652) for a surprisingly fresh fusion of these texts.

John Rollefson

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost August 30, 2020

Jeremiah 15:15–21

Psalm 26:1–8

Romans 12:9–21

Matthew 16:21–28

Engaging the Texts

This week’s gospel text from Matthew follows immediately upon Simon Peter’s confession of Jesus as “Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus blesses Peter and says, “Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” (Matt 16:16-18) In this Sunday’s portion, Jesus has begun to instruct Peter and the other disciples about the path of suffering and death that he is leading them on. Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. Then Jesus calls Peter the Rock, “Satan” and a stumbling block. The contrast between the two passages and the two Sundays will be important to highlight, especially if people missed worship a week ago.

Based upon his own claim of faithfully suffering for proclaiming the word given him, Jeremiah lodges a complaint against Yahweh. The word given to Jeremiah to preach is that Jerusalem must die and go into exile. After preaching the word God gave him, why is the messenger’s pain unceasing and the wound incurable? In response, God makes a deeper command, “If you will return, I will return to you (take you back) ...” (Jer 15:19). Once Jeremiah turns back to God, then Jeremiah’s opponents will turn to him and he will not bend to them. The text ends with God’s assurance of deliverance and redemption.

The psalmist pleads for God’s deliverance from injustice based upon their own life of integrity and trust. The psalmist is sure of their own faithfulness and purity and declares their path is based on God’s steadfast love. The psalmist then complains about their enemies and pleads for God to save them (Ps 26:4-6a and 9-11). In the middle of the psalm, the psalmist walks around the altar in the beauty of God’s house (v. 8). This verse is at the end of the psalm portion appointed for today, but in the whole psalm, worship is at the center. God’s steadfast love is loved by the psalmist.

As part of this summer’s continuous reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans, today’s lection picks up on the themes of love. In this case this love is for others in and beyond the diverse, conflicted, and persecuted community of believers. Paul exhorts the disciples in Rome to a deep, sincere, mutual, generous, humble, and steadfast love (agape). Let God’s wrath be free to deal with your enemies—while you treat your enemies to a meal.

Pastoral Reflections

On June 1, 2020, the President of the United States ordered peaceful demonstrators, including Episcopal priests and lay leaders, to be tear-gassed and cleared from the plaza and steps of St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. Then he walked across Lafayette Square with his all-white entourage of aides. He stood in front of the church sign which declares "All Are Welcome," while holding up someone's Bible. He refused to claim it was his Bible; he only would say, "It's a Bible."

The President was obviously using the military and police as well as the sacred texts and a church building to advance his own attack. It was an obscene, idolatrous, and blasphemous gesture. Church leaders, like me, were shocked, outraged, and aghast. How could we and our sacred symbols be so abused?

In the morning, our eyes cleared from the tear-gas and our bruises beginning to heal, God came again and reminded some of us that the suffering of the church, the messenger of God, was incomparable to the wounds of white supremacy and racism that actually killed Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, and George Floyd in Minnesota. In the morning, we remembered that while the President desecrated a church and blasphemed the gospel of Jesus Christ, our systems have been dehumanizing indigenous and black people for centuries with the complicity of the church.

While we can complain about the President's attack and can decry the Administration's legitimization and escalation of white supremacist and racist ideology, we must remember that our federal and local governments have had years to work for more racial justice and equity. In D.C., as the city got richer over the past decade, black and Latino people have been pushed down and out, including my congregation's own neighborhood east of the U.S. Capitol.

This racial inequity had a human cost even before this Spring's murders and the COVID-19 pandemic. In May 2019, the difference in life expectancy between a mostly white zip code (Woodley Park) and a mostly black zip code (Congress Heights) was 21 years. A whole generation of life cut short in D.C.

Like Jeremiah and Peter, the church is also given a word to declare in our time: The demonic system of white supremacy must die. As we preach that word, let the church beware of the ways we deny our complicity and hesitate to acknowledge the real and deadly wounds in our communities and in black and brown bodies. God will demand the church to repent, to turn and turn again. Then perhaps rather than being baited to respond with self-righteousness and vengeance, we will see God save the persecuted, deliver the oppressed from the hand of the wicked, and redeem the enslaved from the grasp of the ruthless.

Mike Wilker

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 6, 2020

Ezekiel 33:7–11

Psalm 119:33–40

Romans 13:8–14

Matthew 18:15–20

Engaging the Texts

This week and next we hear Jesus speak of boundless forgiveness as the heart of the new community. The verses preceding today's gospel text include context that preachers may find helpful to include in their sermons. In Matthew, the disciples prompt Jesus' discourse on forgiveness by asking "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus calls disciples to become like children, warns about failing to care for children and "little ones," and delivers a parable about seeking the lost sheep.

This Sunday's gospel text outlines a four-step process to embody the spirit of the shepherd in a community where siblings sin against each other. If after taking the first three steps, offenders refuse to listen, the rest of the disciples are to treat them like Gentiles and tax collectors (see Matt 8:1-11, 9:9-13, 15:21-28 for ways Jesus treats them).

When the church acts to bind and set free, heaven actively participates and wills that not one "little one" will be lost (v. 14). Robert H. Smith wrote, "When two people, formerly estranged and warring, now agree on earth and offer a shared request to God, they tap awesome power."⁷

The text from Ezekiel immediately precedes the message from a refugee that Jerusalem has fallen. This is a pivotal moment in the life of the nation, the prophet, and in the scroll of Ezekiel. Today's section re-states Ezekiel's prophetic call to be a sentinel to warn the house of Israel of impending doom (Ezek. 3:16-21). In the catastrophe, Israel laments "How then can we live?" The LORD responds that even in the midst of the disastrous consequences of sin there is an opening for repentance and life. The prophet continues (beyond the pericope) to say that past righteousness is no safeguard from death and past wickedness is no stumbling block to new life. The prophet exhorts the house of Israel to restore the collateral taken from indebted people.

The Romans text continues the lectionary reading of Paul's letter. Here Paul recalls the ten commandments and says they are summed up in the commandment from Leviticus 19, "Love your neighbor as yourself." He also exhorts readers to wake up to the day of salvation, leave sin behind, and put on Jesus Christ.

7. Robert H. Smith, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament*, 1989.

Pastoral Reflections

Paul's instruction to love one another and follow the Levitical command to "love your neighbor as yourself" can be a way to read the rest of today's texts. This kind of love is not a sentimental, privatized emotion. Love in Paul and in Leviticus concerns the whole well-being of the neighbor and community. In the preceding verses Paul says everyone should be subject to the governing authorities who have authority from God and who serve God's purpose. Paul then talks about owing taxes, paying obligations, and giving honor. The economic and relational aspects of agape are clear to Paul. Leviticus 19 reminds us that loving our neighbor entails providing food for people on society's margins, paying fair wages to migrants, treating blind and deaf people with respect, judging court cases without favoritism or deference, and not standing idly by when a neighbor's blood is shed.

A sermon based on Ezekiel could focus on the systemic sin of the nation or local community. American individualism may cause hearers to think the wicked Ezekiel identifies are only individual lawbreakers, but the lament decries communal transgressions. The "house of Israel" does not refer only to one bad king. It appears to refer to the monarchial system. This could be an opportunity to consider how we sin collectively through our institutions. A sermon could confess the ways your local government, school district, and other institutions of authority have failed to enact love that is in accord with God's instruction. Then what is the remedy? How then can we live? As Ezekiel continues, the possibility of communal life is not based on the goodness or wickedness of individuals, but on comprehensive acts of repentance, reparations, and reform—and ultimately upon God's judgment which confounds ours (Ezek 33:17-20).

A sermon based on Matthew might turn our attention to sin within the church. Where two or more are gathered in Jesus' name isn't a reference to a happy congregational potluck. Where two or more are gathered in Jesus's name refers to a community in which grave sins have been addressed and change in Jesus Christ is being enacted.

The church itself has failed to enact Jesus' discipline when the people in authority are the ones who have offended someone with less power. I have heard and observed and been part of times when women spoke up about sexist and harassing behavior and then were vilified by men; when LGBTQ+ people were told by heterosexual pastors that they were the ones causing the church to suffer and split; and when Black, Indigenous, and other people of color suffered added burdens because of "White Fragility." (See Robin DiAngelo's book by that title.)

So then "How can we live?" I commend *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*. This book is cowritten by Archbishop Desmond Tutu

and his daughter the Rev. Mpho Tutu van Furth. Born from their experience confronting apartheid, as well as Mpho's experience as a lesbian, the book places forgiveness within the framework of restorative justice. Imagine a church leader who has perpetuated sexism, homophobia, and/or racism being treated as a Gentile or a tax collector (such as the writer of this gospel). Can you imagine it?

Mike Wilker

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 13, 2020

Genesis 50:15–21

Psalm 103:1–13

Romans 14:1–12

Matthew 18:21–35

"**B**ut Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?'" (Gen 50:19)

We are bold enough to claim that in our proclamation we stand in the place (and the grace) of God! Where do we find the courage to see and proclaim God's forgiving and liberating action in this troubled world? These texts raise stark questions of what exactly justice and forgiveness are, and how they are breathed out in our calling in the world.

I write this in Minneapolis, a week after George Floyd, another African-American man, was killed by a white police officer investigating a suspected forgery. I write this after the neighborhood around the church I serve has been devastated by arson, violence, and looting: there is no place to buy food or medicine, no bank, many trusted cultural institutions have been destroyed or damaged. I write this a week after COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. topped 100,000. I write this not being able to comprehend the evil and pain we have wrought and continue to suffer. But I also write this during a time when our church and our neighborhood have come together to defend each other and support each other in new ways.

I write this nine days away from retiring. I have no idea what the world will have laid before you between the time of my writing and when you will preach on these texts. What new injustice or hope will be visited upon us? Perhaps you could spend the whole sermon talking about exactly what forgiveness is and isn't. The readings from Genesis and Matthew show two different ways of dealing with forgiveness.

What did Joseph's brothers do when their father died? His death meant the loss of their protection against Joseph's wrath for what they had done to him. Reality smacked them in the face, and so they did what we often do when reality smacks us: they decided to come up with a plan.

They also did what we often do: they went back to dis-

sembling. They invented a story about their dead father asking Joseph to forgive them. The text doesn't say if Joseph believed them or not, but it appears that he had already decided on forgiveness.

In the Gospel, the slave who owed an unimaginable debt (what would that be today?—millions, maybe) begged the king for patience, and made an impossible promise to repay *everything*. We don't know what was in his mind when he made that offer; most likely, it was self-preservation. But he didn't get what he asked for: instead of patience, he received complete forgiveness of his debt.

The next slave, who owed “just” a huge debt asked the forgiven one for the same favor. (Note that he does not say he will pay back *everything* however). Instead, he receives condemnation. To a debtor's prison, a kind of slavery. This act rekindles the king's wrath, which leads to more condemnation, including of the slave's family members.

It's not hard to draw a parallel between the Gospel story and today's politics. Insults, threats, and fear of losing power lead to condemnation in the form of violence, which leads to more violence.

What is the key difference between the stories in Genesis and Matthew? Relationship. Debtor relationships are strictly economical, and often punitive. Joseph has a relationship with his brothers that was already being restored while their father was alive. This is because Joseph has a relationship with his own pain and loss, his own narrative of betrayal and enslavement, and a deep relationship with God who has transformed that pain into blessing. No doubt, at great cost to Joseph. Cue Jesus, and the cross.

The brothers and the servants had self-preservation foremost in their minds. Joseph had such deep faith; he could put the preservation of others foremost.

Many churches will make mention of September 11, 2001, in their prayers this week, perhaps mentioning the names of the dead. What if we also prayed for the dead of our endless wars since then? What if we also mentioned the victims of September 11, 1973, when we helped overthrow the elected government of Chile, causing thousands of deaths?

There will be calls for forgiveness and healing for our nation over the next months and years. But a forgiveness that bypasses right relationship will be hollow. A hollow forgiveness with the restoration of justice may lead us into even worse nightmares.

Patrick Cabello Hansel

Feast of the Holy Cross September 14, 2020

Numbers 21:4–9

Psalm 98:1–4

1 Corinthians 1:18–24

John 3:13–17

“But the people became impatient on the way.”

(Num 21:4)

I suspect that could be a motto for nearly every preacher! The people became impatient that is, if they weren't impatient to begin with!

Some of us may want our people to be *more* impatient—impatient for justice, for fundamental change in church and society, for an end to division and impatience. That can be a good thing. But impatience in the service of justice can easily lead to violence to self (burnout, depression) and violence to others.

If I weren't in the process of packing up my books before retirement, I would pull out Dorothee Soelle's wonderful book *Revolutionary Patience* and quote her. I'll have to settle for these words posted on DailyKos on November 4, 2013:

(Revolutionary Patience) holds in tension a sense of urgency consistent with the size of the problems we face (e.g., catastrophic climate change) and a resilience that meets setbacks and defeats with both the hope and determinism to remain in the struggle for the long haul.

That is a pretty good essence of the foolishness and wisdom of the cross that Paul speaks of. For the early Christian community, which knew the literal cross firsthand, these words must have been jarring. I mean, Paul puts this into the first chapter of his first letter to the Corinthian believers. He's not softening the challenge for a community in struggle in a cruel world, but he does provide hope.

The hope is found in a dual set of promises: we are being saved and we are the called. For the early Christian community, the wisdom of the cross would have certainly seemed folly to their rulers and even neighbors. The ruling ideology proclaimed that salvation, indeed, peace—*Pax Romana*—was made through overwhelming force.

For early Christians—and especially for us in these days—the wisdom of the cross is not simply that Jesus died via state ordered execution. Jesus' call to discipleship is to take up our cross and *follow* him. That following is not only to death, but to the way Jesus lived a cruciform life in his ministry: eating with sinners, welcoming the “impure,” challenging the cruel sacrificial system, healing and feeding everyone

regardless of culture or background. If this is not a time for the church to live that out, when will it be?

I must admit, I'm of two minds about celebrating the Feast of the Holy Cross. Its origin is traced to the legend of the discovery of the *True Cross* by Empress Helena in 326, supposedly on September 14. This "miraculous" discovery no doubt helped solidify the power of her son, Constantine, the emperor who made Christianity legal and then a state religion. For the Americas, the idea of the *True Cross* has a painful history. Veracruz, the Mexican city on the Gulf of Mexico means "true cross." Hernán Cortés landed there on Good Friday and took that coincidence as a sign of divine Providence, a blessing to rape, murder, and enslave people.

Maybe this day would be a good time to preach on empire. How have we used the cross to divide and subjugate, rather than liberate? How can we live out its foolish wisdom?

We have the incredible blessings of John 3:16-17 to sustain us. God's love for the world is bountiful, transformative, and real. That's a word our people thirst for in these times, and one we are privileged to bear.

Patrick Cabello Hansel

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 20, 2020

Jonah 3:10–4:11

Psalm 145

Philippians 1:21–30

Matthew 20:1–16

God changed God's mind. Right there in verse 10 of Jonah, chapter 3, God changes Their own mind.

I know many Christians like to think of God as unchanging, comforted by the idea of a bedrock foundation that doesn't shift, but if I'm honest, that idea kind of freaks me out. I mean, God is always present—that's true. God will never leave us—that's true, but God has to stay exactly the same, always and forever? Why?

How is that helpful? Do you wish to stay exactly the same, always and forever?

I have two daughters, 6 and 10 years old. As a recovering perfectionist myself, one of the things I want most to instill in them is how much we can learn as we grow and try new things and take risks and screw up and learn more and self-correct and on and on. Whether we're learning multiplication tables or how to speak a new language or how to leverage our own social privilege on behalf of others, we don't know it all right at the start. We don't know it all, *ever*, but we don't know *anything* right at the start. All we can do is start somewhere and commit ourselves to learning more and more, adjusting

our own understanding as we go. In cases where it's called for, once we know better, we do better.

And most of our knowing better is from being in relationship with others. Is this not God's desire, as well? Do we not expect God to be changed by the very nature of Their relationships, just as we are changed by the very nature of ours?

When is the last time you learned/understood something new about a topic that surprised you? About a topic or issue where you thought you knew what you were talking about, but learned that you had missed the mark? What I mean to say is, when is the last time you just got completely schooled? Could you share that with your people? How many of them might be thirsty for permission that they, too, could learn and grow and take risks and screw up and admit to being wrong and then try again, especially in such polarizing times?

I bet some of your people would be blessed to hear this good news.

How often do we assume we know the mind of God? How often do we assume our justice is the same as God's justice? Our generosity the same as God's generosity? How often do we think parishioners make these same assumptions?

I bet some of your people would be blessed to have it pointed out that this tendency is so, so human, but that doesn't mean we have to succumb to it. I bet they would be blessed to be reminded that so often when we draw a line to separate us from them, Jesus is over there on the other side. I bet they would be blessed by the invitation to pay attention to this human tendency in their own selves.

I know I would.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes to members of that community about their joy in the faith, but also their *progress*. He clearly expects the people to shift and change and evolve in their faith and in their understanding of the world around them. Likewise, the landowner in Matthew's gospel challenges the ideas of grace and justice that his workers arrive with, especially those who've been working the longest, which harkens back to Jonah. Jonah feels entitled to his anger over the withering of a bush he had no part in cultivating, but thinks God should delight in the destruction of a people who bear God's very image.

All these texts, upending the assumptions we hold so dear. All these texts, inviting us to learn and grow and evolve and *change our minds*, right along with God.

You're reading this in order to preach at the end of September, but I'm writing it from Minneapolis in early June, ten days after Minneapolis police officers crushed the breath out of George Floyd, a black man, over the mere possibility of a counterfeit \$20 bill. I'm writing in the midst of a citywide-turned-nationwide uprising, where demands for justice and reform and new ways of thinking and new ways of governing and new ways of being and belonging in community have

risen to a fever pitch. George Floyd is hardly the first black person killed by law enforcement, but something about his particular death (the clear video, the look of indifference on former officer Derek Chauvin's face as he presses the life out of George Floyd, the long history of racial bias in the Minneapolis Police Department) has been the straw to break the camel's back, and this movement shows no signs of letting up.

I have no way of knowing what this situation will look like more than three months from now. Still, for now, thank God. Thank God that we the people (and especially we the white people) are listening and learning and growing and trying and screwing up and listening again and trying again. Thank God we're progressing, as Paul expected of the church in Philippi. I hope to God this is still the case by the time you're reading this.

Friends, we have a God who is happy to change Their mind when the situation calls for it, when They can see a way for abundance to win over scarcity, justice over false peace. We have a God who has no use for perfectionists in the church nor in the streets; only for people who are willing to take risks, and learn, and change, and grow.

I bet some of your people would be blessed to hear this good news.

Andrea Roske-Metcalf

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost September 27, 2020

Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32

Psalm 25

Philippians 2:1–13

Matthew 21:23–32

Reflections on the Texts

“Work out your own salvation.”

Well, that sounds harsh, especially to those of us who aren't so into works-righteousness. If we're Lutherans we're ready to argue with Paul and remind him that we are justified by faith, apart from works of the law. Then we remember that Paul already knows that and he'll write it down later in a letter to the Romans. But here in this letter he says, “Work out your own salvation.” Figure it out. Do it on your own.

But Paul says this to members of the church in Philippi in the same sentence where he calls them beloved and reminds them that God is at work in them. Maybe he's being blunt, but he's not unkind. He's simply asking them to rise to the occasion, the way any good leader would.

Work out your own salvation, beloveds.

Children's sermons are my favorite. I'm no longer serving in a traditional parish setting, but when I was, facilitating the children's sermon was often the highlight of my week. It's a lot of improvisation and some weeks are far better than others. But at the end of the day, there was only one thing I wanted those kids to remember: you are created in God's very image, and that means you know something—innately—about who God is, without having to be told by anyone claiming any expertise.

You are a child of God. This means you know something—innately—about who God is.

I wanted the kids to know this because I didn't want them to wait around for some so-called expert—a pastor or Sunday school teacher or even a parent or grandparent—to teach them about who God is and how God operates. And because I wanted them to feel free to question and challenge the so-called experts with what they know in their own bones to be true.

You don't need experts to work out your own salvation, beloveds. Paul knew it. He knew that all you need is your God and your community.

However, the chief priests and elders of the temple did not know that in the story found in Matthew's gospel. This so-called expertise is all they cared about: Who are you? Who sent you? Who do you think is in charge here? For whom do you speak?

Jesus has no desire to play into their hand, even though he has all the authority in heaven and on earth at his disposal. He answers their questions with a question, and follows it up with a story that sounds like a riddle, and then he drives the whole thing home by lifting up the very people the chief priests and elders barely even notice—the tax collectors and prostitutes.

It's clear from the whole of the gospels that Jesus did not disregard tax collectors or prostitutes; on the contrary, he sought them out for help, for refuge, for relationship. He lifts them up in this account and flips the ideas of authority and expertise on their heads.

Who are the so-called tax collectors and prostitutes of our time? Of our faith? Of each of our particular contexts and communities? Does the good news we proclaim each week even matter to them? What would it sound like to rewrite this parable in such a way that the people in your own community would hear it as their own, in such a way that it would jar them, much like it must have jarred the chief priests and elders of the temple?

What would it sound like to invite your own beloveds to work out their own salvation? What kinds of tools do they already have at their disposal for such work? What more do they need? How have you helped to build their community up in such a way that they trust themselves to do this work, even when you're not in the room, or perhaps especially when you are?

I don't know the answers to any of these questions; they're all too contextual. If you choose to use them, then finding the answers (or at the very least, engaging the questions) is your preaching task. But I believe Paul. After he implores the Philippians to work out their own salvation, he tells them that God is at work in them, enabling them both to will and to work for God's good pleasure.

May it be so for us, just the same.

Andrea Roske-Metcalf



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