Preaching Helps

July 4–September 26, 2021: Sixth Sunday after Pentecost through the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Embracing Messiness in Our Preaching

If you read only "Preaching Helps" in this journal, you may have missed the theme of this issue: "Our Bodies Are Sacred: Theology Beyond Cisgender Heterosexuality." Maybe you intentionally skipped the essays. Maybe you'll decide now to go back and read them. One of the editors for this issue invited readers to consider the gift of messiness:

> Queer theology is, in many ways, a way of learning to embrace messiness. By resisting the ways that theology encourages neat and clear lines, queer theology makes messes and lets them coexist with each other to create a richer theological net to hold more of those historically ignored and oppressed by the church.[1]

Of course, messiness is hard to live with! We try to tidy things up, put things and people into categories, and make sure we color inside the lines. Most preachers probably won't talk about "cisgender heterosexuality" in their sermons because it's hard to say and many people listening aren't familiar with this language. Besides, those words won't show up in the appointed lectionary texts! It's easier to read about sexuality in a journal than to preach about sexuality on Sunday morning. Yet the people sitting in the sanctuary (or watching online) are sexual beings with their own longings and questions, struggles and joys about sexuality. Some of them probably wonder about all the changes in the ELCA since the 2009 Churchwide Assembly affirmed the ordination of gay and lesbian people. (Later this affirmation came to include bisexual and transgender people without another vote.)

We've experienced some surprises in our part of the Christian family. In 2013 the Southwest California Synod of the ELCA elected the Rev. Dr. Guy Erwin, a married gay man as their bishop. Bishop Erwin was then a professor at California Lutheran University where he taught Reformation history and theology. After serving for seven years, Bishop Erwin was elected as president of United Lutheran Seminary with campuses in Philadelphia and Gettysburg. In 2019, the Rev. Kevin Strickland was elected bishop of Southeastern Synod. No doubt it surprised more than a few people when a married gay man was elected bishop of a synod comprised of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. This year, on May 8, 2021, the Sierra Pacific Synod elected the Rev. Dr. Meghan Rohrer, the first transgender bishop in the ELCA. Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton said that while she recognized the historic nature of Rohrer's election, the appointment was not only about their gender, but about all the gifts the bishop-elect brings to the church, including their focus on those who have been marginalized. Bishop Eaton respectfully used the pronoun "they" in her comments because that is bishop-elect Rohrer's preferred pronoun. For many people using "they" to speak about one person is, well, messy. Bishop Eaton went on: "What this means for the whole denomination, I believe, is that when we say, 'All are welcome, and there's a place for you here,' we mean this." (*Religious News Service*, May 1, 2021). In that same article, bishop-elect Rohrer said:

> If there are people who are curious about why or how the Lutherans could elect a transgender person as our bishop, I deeply hope that curiosity they have will inspire them to notice all the wonderful ways God sometimes is able to do more than we noticed, with more people than we thought possible and in more places than we imagined.

No doubt some in the ELCA and beyond will see these elections as messy, outside the neat lines we had drawn for the Church over the centuries. But messiness often brings God's surprises. While some are asking, "What has happened to our church?" others are saying, "What wonderful gifts these LGBTQ leaders have brought to our church." How sad it would be if we had missed them for fear of messiness. As you read commentaries by writers for this issue, think of ways to bring in the gifts of LGBTQ people, even when they are not in the text. Jesus was rejected in his hometown of Nazareth: how many queer people have been rejected over the centuries? Imagine a transgender person begging Jesus to heal their daughter. "It's not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," said Jesus. Jesus set a child in the midst of his disciples and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Who would you put in that underlined phrase? Perhaps we'll make a new bookmark for our Bibles: "Messiness is Next to Godliness."

Many thanks to our writers for this issue of Preaching Helps. We're happy to welcome Pastor Eric Hanson serving in rural Iowa, as well as Phil and Lori Ruge-Jones from Eau Claire, Wisconsin. You'll find a link to hear Phil present the gospel of Mark from memory. Both he and Lori are passionate about biblical story telling. We also welcome back several familiar friends:

1. River Cook Needham, Introduction to the issue: "A Mess Makes Us Free" *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 48, No.3, 1.

Patrick Cabello Hansel is a retired Lutheran pastor, who served for 35 years in multicultural communities in the Bronx, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis. He is also a poet and fiction writer. He has published two books of poetry: *The Devouring Land* (Main Street Rag Publishing) and *Quitting Time* (Atmosphere Press). See more at https://www.artecabellohansel.com. **Eric I. Hanson** has served as pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Andover, Iowa, since 2016. His wife, Carina Schiltz, serves as pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Preston, Iowa, and the two of them live in Preston. Eric authored the essay titled "The Hope of Grace: An Essay Exploring the New Atheism, the Church, and the Gospel," published in Vol. 44 No. 2 of *Currents in Theology and Mission*. He is passionate about faith-based advocacy and is actively involved with the Midwest Chapter of Bread for the World, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, and Lutheran Services in Iowa. **Lori Ruge-Jone**s is pastor of campus and congregation at University Lutheran Church in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. She delights in biblical storytelling performance as a spiritual practice and as a means of creating community and faithfulness rooted in sacred story. **Phil Ruge-Jones** has learned and tells the Gospel of Mark by heart. A recording can be found on the "Phil Ruge-Jones" YouTube channel playlist "I Tell You, This is the Way it is." He is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. **Miriam Samuelson-Roberts** is senior pastor at Christ Church Lutheran in south Minneapolis and co-host of the podcast Alter Guild. She graduated from Yale Divinity School and is a member of Proclaim, a group for LGBTQIA rostered leaders in the ELCA. She lives in Minneapolis with her husband, Daniel, and their children, Esther and Elijah. **Bradley Schmeling** serves as senior pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, St. Paul, Minnesota. A graduate of Ohio University and Trinity Lutheran Seminary, he did doctoral work at Emory University in ritual studies and pastoral care. He has served congregations in Columbus, Ohio, and Atlanta, Georgia, and now lives in the Twin Cities with his husband, Darin, learning to love winter and trusting the promise of spring. **John Rohde Schwehn** serves as a pastor at Christ the King Lutheran Church in New Brighton, Minnesota. He lives in Minneapolis with his wife, Anna, and their two daughters. He loves baking breads and pizzas with members of his congregation in their newly built wood-fired community brick oven, connecting practices of hospitality and eating with hunger-related causes in their neighborhood. When he's not pastoring or chasing children, John and a friend sometimes reflect on the lectionary texts in front of a microphone and post these reflections online as the Brew Testament Podcast.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, Preaching Helps

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 4, 2021

Ezekiel 2:1–5
Psalm 123
2 Corinthians 12:2–10
Mark 6:1–13

Engaging the texts for preaching

Ezekiel has an unenviable call: God sends him to tell a people who are rebellious, impudent, and stubborn: "Thus says the Lord." What the Lord is about to say is not easy to hear. God tells Ezekiel there is a good chance they will refuse to hear, because Israel is a "rebellious house." Get ready for exciting ministry, Ezekiel!

That's a perfect situation to be in as a preacher on the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, this year coinciding with the Fourth of July. I am not a fan of conflating liturgical Sundays with national holidays, but it may not be so easy to avoid it this year. After a pandemic year, mass protests against violence against black bodies, and an insurrection in our nation's capital, our hearers may be looking for a "good word" for the nation.

What will that good word be? For many of us, there is a longing to "get back to normal." We need a reassurance that the God of our mothers and fathers is with us in these times. But Ezekiel's word from the LORD was not designed to soothe, as much as to challenge. Right after this text, God gives Ezekiel a scroll to eat (v. 8-10). On it are written words of lamentation and mourning and woe. Whoa is right! Although he says the scroll tastes sweet, Ezekiel takes no delight in proclaiming God's judgment on his own people. Ezekiel will not escape the fate of his people. He will not be the kind of prophet who denounces injustice as something other people do. In the midst of his own people's stubbornness and suffering, Ezekiel will have to share the good word from God, however unpalatable that may be to his hearers.

What will that good word be for us, who are called not to stand against our people, but to stand with them, speaking a word from God that may taste sweet to us and bitter to our hearers? We have barely begun the reckoning with racial injustice and violence in this country. I write this from Minneapolis a year after George Floyd's murder. How much has changed? And how do we speak the word of God's justice in a way that our hearers can hear it?

The people of Jesus' hometown had heard all about their famous son, and the works he had done. Maybe they hoped to see a demonstration of his power. In Jesus' time, Nazareth was a town of about 1,800 inhabitants. If you've lived in a small town, you know how everybody knows everybody's business.

Or at least they *think* they do. The blessings of a small town can be that everybody *watches out* for everyone else. The curse can be that everyone *watches* what everyone does, ready to see what they want to see and share that perception with others.

Churches can be like that as well, no matter how large or small. We think we know each other because we see each other all the time, and we make decisions based on what we think we see. But what we see is often determined by *who we see with*, that is, the biases of our group. There's a Mexican proverb that translated means, "Everything you see depends on the color of your lens." The people of Nazareth were not wearing rose-colored glasses, for sure.

Why would people who were longing for liberation lash out at it when it comes? Galilee had suffered terribly from Roman occupation; you would think that the people of Nazareth would be overjoyed to encounter Jesus' liberating power.

There is a deep-seated fear in us that sees a call to a new way of life as threatening. Even those who would most benefit from a new order cling to the old ways. Chapter 6 of the Gospel of Mark is a turning point in Jesus' ministry, away from the established way (synagogue worship) to the radical new way (healing, teaching, and gathering a community in the villages).

Ched Myers in *Binding the Strong Man* notes that this encounter is the third and last time Jesus makes a "public appearance in the symbolic space of a synagogue on the sabbath" (p. 212). In Mark 1, Jesus expels a demon and his fame spreads throughout Galilee. In Mark 3, Jesus heals a man's withered hand, and the Pharisees begin to conspire with the Herodians to destroy him. In chapter 6, Jesus "could do no deed of power there," because of the people's "unbelief" (vv 5-6). (Though he did lay his hands on a few sick people and cured them.)

What is Jesus' response to these rejections? Does he modify his preaching style or evangelism strategy? No, he doubles down on the mission. He goes out to the villages and sends the twelve out with authority over unclean spirits (quite a gift to fishermen, a tax collector and a Zealot!). The way Jesus sends them out is in itself a mission. They take what they need to travel—a staff and sandals (the latter found only in Mark). What they need to live on—food, shelter, community—will come from the very people they are sent to. This may be the key to this whole pericope: shake off the dust of the hometown and the synagogue and go, be welcomed by strangers.

In the churches I pastored, we tried to practice what we called "radical hospitality." Everyone was welcome, everyone's gifts were affirmed. Maybe we missed the boat. Jesus' vision of hospitality is not that we welcome those different from us, but that we seek to be welcomed by (and therefore be dependent on) those different from us. A more vulnerable style of mission, and more fruitful, I think.

Patrick Cabello Hansel

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 11, 2021

Amos 7:7–15
Psalm 85:8–13
Ephesians 1:3–14
Mark 6:14–29

Engaging the texts for preaching

Here, as in last week's reading from Ezekiel, the prophet is given a tough calling. Amos is to proclaim—to a nation that is still relatively prosperous and at peace—that their "sanctuaries…shall be laid waste" (v. 9). To make it clear to whom he is speaking, and what the consequences of their actions are, he doubles down in v. 10: "Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land." Not the easiest message to speak to the religious and political leaders in any time, but seriously, Amos? Things aren't perfect, but they aren't *that* bad in Israel. The Northern Kingdom was still a long way from being destroyed. But to the powers, Amos' words ring with the phrase "no news can be good news."

The religious and political powers respond with fear and paranoia. Amaziah the priest tells King Jeroboam that "Amos has *conspired* against you in the very center of the house of Israel." (v. 10) How dare he! A word against the established religion is so hard to hear that "the *land* is not able to bear all his words." Sound familiar? Black Lives Matter. Love is Love. No Human Being is Illegal.

Then Amos has the nerve to tell the priest that he isn't a prophet, isn't in the line of certified prophets, but a farmworker. Whom God has chosen. Amaziah proposes a *voluntary* deportation: Amos is to go away to another land. We don't need any fuss in Israel.

Amaziah and Jeroboam are interested in the structures and rules of kingdom and religion. Those powers are founded in the past, continued through structures, regulations and shared bias. A prophet who sees a radically different future cannot be allowed to upset that order.

King Herod is a past dweller, too—a real law and order kind of guy. (Except when it comes to personal morality, of course.) When he hears of Jesus' power, he thinks Jesus is John raised from the dead. Others think he's Elijah or one of the old prophets. Herod wants to keep the deeds of the past in the past; he and those around him lack the imagination to see that God is doing a brand new thing in Jesus.

Then we hear the backstory of the famous beheading. Herod invites all the powers to a feast. The NRSV translates the Greek as "his courtiers and officers and…the leaders of Galilee." That sounds a bit foreign to my modern ears. I mean, who are the courtiers of our days? The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament translates the Greek as "court nobles, military commanders and the most prominent persons."

We still have to get around the "court" business, but essentially these men (and I'm sure they are all men) are the political, military, and economic elite of Galilee. They are gathered to celebrate the puppet king's birthday. Wouldn't you love to be a fly on the wall for that feast? Publicly, the elites overflow with their praise for Herod; but in whispers and inner thoughts, at least some see him for the fool he is.

What is the real purpose of this feast? Is it not to relish in the power they share and reinforce the hierarchy in place? No way do they want their feasting interrupted with a prophet who proposes a radical future in their faces. (Plus, that John dude lives a simple life, and doesn't even know how to dress for polite society!) But Herod is intrigued with John's preaching—I mean, you gotta have religion in a well-functioning state!

But he's more intrigued with preserving his precarious power. And when he makes a ridiculous pledge to his daughter (only in Mark is she called Herod's daughter, not Herodias'), Herodias and her mother up the ante: the head of John. Only in Mark does Herodias *fille* add a nice, demonic touch: give me that head on a platter! Herod, the master politician, is trapped by his own words. He can't afford to be seen as a liar in front of the elite (who probably have loosened tongues because of all the wine). So, he orders the beheading. I imagine the feast went on for a long time after that. Even the death of a just man couldn't stop it.

So, where's the good news in this pericope? I think we can find it in two places. First, the gospel story ends with an act of courageous devotion. John's disciples come, take his body, and bury it. Friends of a subversive prophet would have been seen as subversives as well. Yet, they perform a tender, loving act in the midst of a grisly affair.

The other is tucked into the psalm, a song from the past that is so relevant today.

> [10] Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
> justice and peace will kiss each other.
> [11] Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
> and justice will look down from the sky.

Note that I followed the translation of every Spanish version of the Bible and used "justice" rather than "righteousness." I think that is more in keeping with the truth of the text. Righteousness in our culture has come to mean personal integrity; something greater than that is at stake here. In these troubled times, we are called to practice the kiss of peace **and** justice. And we are promised that faithfulness will spring from the very creation, and justice from the heavens. Even a beheading cannot stop that kind of power.

Patrick Cabello Hansel

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 18, 2021

Jeremiah 23:1–6
Psalm 23
Ephesians 2:11–22
Mark 6: 30–34, 53–56

Jeremiah 23:1–6

One of the most prevalent themes throughout the book of Jeremiah is that not even exile will sever the great bond between יְהוָה (Yahweh) and Yahweh's people. This passage declares that Yahweh will "gather the remnant of [Yahweh's] flock" and "bring them back to their fold" where "they shall be fruitful and multiply."[2] Further, Yahweh "will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed." The reading culminates by declaring, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." Hearing this would have been good news for Jeremiah's audience. As people whose lives had been so deeply disrupted by exile, they probably felt comforted by Yahweh's declaration that there would be "justice and righteousness in the land." Some probably even felt this was a sign that things would be restored to exactly the way they were before the exile.

Today, many people are pining for things to return to the way they were before the pandemic began. However, as the cries in the face of injustices around the world have demonstrated, all was not well prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, the Hebrew Scriptures show that things were not good for everyone prior to exile either. Thus, Yahweh raising up a leader who will "execute justice and righteousness in the land" should not be understood as a return to exactly the way things were prior to the exile or the COVID-19 pandemic. How might preachers proclaim that the coming reign of God's justice and righteousness is not a total return to "normal" because "normal" was not working for all of God's creation? How might preachers also lift up how the bond between God and God's people will always hold firm, just

2. Unless otherwise noted, translations cited from biblical texts in my articles come from the NRSV.

like in Jeremiah?

A final important note is that the word "justice" comes from the Hebrew, מִשְׁפָּט (mišpāṭ), which can also be translated rectitude.[3] Preachers should be mindful that there are many different understandings of what justice means in North America today and make strides to faithfully proclaim the biblical understanding of *mišpāṭ*.

Psalm 23

In modern North American culture, Psalm 23 has almost become a cliché, referenced so frequently that it often no longer conveys the original meaning to hearers. It would be wise for preachers to remain cognizant of this issue and imagine how to offer a faithful sermon so this psalm could be heard anew.

Ephesians 2:11–22

The book of Ephesians grapples with the universal significance of what God has done in Christ. One aspect of this universal significance is that all people are equal before God. The reading declares that Christ brings individuals "near" "who once were far off" by breaking "down the dividing wall," and this establishes "peace." These words were challenging because there were many structures in the Ancient Mediterranean world, which both inhibited people from being treated equally and perpetuated divisions between the people. There was even a physical wall inside the Jerusalem Temple that separated the Court of the Gentiles from the inner sanctuaries in which only people who were Jewish were allowed.[4] The specific wording in verse 12 of "aliens" and "strangers" is evocative of some of the other inequalities and divisions from the setting in which Ephesians was written. It is in this context that Ephesians proclaims the radical good news that Christ has made "one new humanity."

I'm sure that many of you, like myself, serve communities of faith where there is conflict between different members over a variety of issues. Preachers should be cautious not to conflate the complex conflicts at the center of this Ephesians text with some of the more trivial conflicts we may see in the communities of faith we serve (i.e., disagreements about the color of altar flowers or the location of a bookshelf). However, the words of Ephesians do have something important to say to us today, especially when equality still has not been achieved, serious conflicts are harming God's creation, and there are both literal as well as figurative dividing walls in place. What might it look like to proclaim the "new humanity" and "peace" that Christ establishes in this context?

A final important distinction about the word "peace." I have discovered that some modern North American parishioners understand peace to mean uniformity or an absence of disagreement. This seems especially prevalent in predominantly white North American congregations. However, God's peace challenges that understanding, as Dr. King declared, "genuine peace is not the absence of tension, but the presence of justice."[5] It would be wise for preachers serving in mainly white North American congregations to be aware of this discrepancy and discern how to proclaim the genuine peace established by God in Christ.

Mark 6:30–34, 53–56

Narratively this passage begins right after the death of John the Baptist, when Jesus and the disciples board a boat to head off "to a deserted place by themselves." However, "many saw [Jesus and the disciples] going and recognized them and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them." When the boat reaches shore, Jesus sees this "great crowd" which has formed and has "compassion for them." At this point the lectionary jumps ahead 19 verses, skipping over several important things in this passage including Mark's account of Jesus feeding five thousand, probably because John's version of this story is appointed for next Sunday. The excluded verses also tell of Jesus' disciples getting into a boat while he prays on a mountain. Finally, Jesus walks on the lake waters to get into the boat with the disciples. The lectionary reading resumes when Jesus and the disciples reach the "land at Gennesaret." When they arrive, people recognize Jesus and "began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was" and "**all** who touched [his cloak] were healed."

As I write these words the COVID-19 pandemic has spread around the world; India is at the height of their second wave. COVID-19 has claimed over 3 million lives worldwide with tragic stories of those sick and dying flooding the news daily. While those suffering from COVID-19 are not in the same situation as the sick were in this reading, I know that this story will conjure up comparisons between them in many people's minds. Knowing this, how might preachers proclaim the good news of Jesus healing the sick in a way that does not turn this into a prosperity gospel story, where those who are sick and dying just need to have more faith?

Eric I. Hanson

3. BDB, s.v. "מִשְׁפָּט."

4. Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 335.

5. Martin Luther King Jr, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* Edited by Clayborne Carson (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1998), 303.

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
July 25, 2021

2 Kings 4:42–44
Psalm 145:10–18
Ephesians 3:14–21
John 6:1–21

2 Kings 4:42–44

Most Bibles I have seen give this story the title "Elisha Feeds One Hundred" or something similar. The implication is that Elisha acted alone. However, the text says that a man from Baal-shalishah brought the food, which was then set before the people by Elisha's servant, thus they were both involved in feeding the people. Further, when offering the instruction to feed the people, Elisha cites the authority of יְהוָה (Yahweh), so Yahweh was also involved. Therefore, this was not just the work of Elisha but rather the work of many, even if their efforts have been largely overlooked in the telling of this story.

Going through elementary school, I was taught that many important historical events resulted from just a few people's efforts. As I have grown older, I have discovered that the efforts of many other forgotten people were just as vital to many of these important historical events. How might preachers highlight the efforts of the man from Baal-shalishah, Elisha's servant, and so many others whose stories have been overlooked? How might preachers use this as an opportunity to proclaim how God uses all of us for God's work, just like Yahweh does in this story?

Psalm 145:10–18

This psalm offers a beautiful description of the many and various ways that Yahweh provides for creation. The psalmist often addresses Yahweh directly in the second person, showing that they share a close connection with one another. This theme of Yahweh sharing a close connection with Yahweh's creation is further developed in this psalm's depictions of Yahweh's active involvement in, with, and among creation. What do Yahweh's "faithful words" and "gracious deeds" look like today? How might preachers highlight as well as encourage the close connection between Yahweh and Yahweh's "faithful" among those that we serve?

Ephesians 3:14–21

A few years ago, my wife and I purchased a tiny robot that vacuums our home with just the click of a button. It has certainly made cleaning the house a little easier and it is especially convenient for vacuuming harder to reach areas such as underneath tables and chairs. One day we were discussing how much we enjoyed this machine, and I said something like, "I really love the Roomba." That statement caused me to pause for a moment because I realized that I used the word "love" to describe what I felt for a household appliance. This inspired me to reflect more on how casually the word "love" gets used in North America today, that is, how some, including myself, will say they love a type of food or how others will say they love a specific material item. When love is used in this way it seems to be describing enjoyment and this has become one of the most common uses of the word "love" in North America today.

This Ephesians passage offers a very different understanding of love when it declares that the letter's recipients are "are being rooted and grounded in love." Further, the author urges them "to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge." Love here comes from the Greek ***ἀγάπη*** (*agapē*) which means "the quality of warm regard for and interest in another."[6] Knowing that many parishioners are part of a culture in which love is talked about very differently than what Ephesians describes, how might preachers convey the *agapē* love of Christ which is beyond comprehension and in which we are being rooted?

John 6:1–21

One of my seminary professors told a story about when she was a parish pastor and gave a children's message in which she described how she had something living in her backyard with brown fur, that collected lots of nuts, and had a bushy tail. She then asked the children, "Who can tell me what it is that is in my back yard?" One of the kids immediately shot their hand up and answered, "Jesus." The pastor was confused and said, "No, I was talking about a squirrel. What made you think I was describing Jesus?" Without hesitation the child responded, "Because every time you ask us a question, the answer is always Jesus."

The challenge of preaching or writing about the feeding of the 5,000 is the risk that no matter what is proclaimed, many parishioners will probably have a "Jesus the squirrel" moment like the child in this story. Hearing this text again may conjure up images and ideas from memories of listening to this story and sitting through previous sermons about this passage, which may overshadow anything a preacher tries to proclaim. To avoid this obstacle, those preaching on this reading might consider trying a different preaching method than what the congregation is accustomed to hearing. Doing so can make this passage speak in new and exciting ways both for preachers and for the congregations in which they are serving. This will look differently for each of us but some examples of things I have done to change things up in my preaching have included doing dramatic reenactments of biblical readings, looking

6. BDAG, s.v. "***ἀγάπη***"

at depictions of the readings in artwork, and showing video clips that have some relevance to the readings. May the Spirit inspire your own imagination to help make this story come alive and be heard anew once again.

Eric I. Hanson

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 1, 2021

Exodus 16:2–4, 9–15
Psalm 78:23–29
Ephesians 4:1–16
John 6:24–35

Engaging the texts for preaching

The first half of John's gospel is known by scholars as "The Book of Signs." As a way of teaching, Jesus performs a series of seven miracles, each one leaving the curious crowds and doubting disciples totally awestruck. In last Sunday's gospel alone, Jesus performed *two* of his seven signs: the feeding of the 5,000 and walking on water. After the feeding miracle, Jesus "withdrew to the mountain by himself" to get away from the frenzy and adoration of the crowd. The disciples get in a boat to find him and encounter unexpectedly harrowing winds. Naturally, Jesus–perhaps hearing their fear and cries for help from his mountaintop retreat–goes to help them, to calm them and the storm. After all of this ado, we might imagine that Jesus is exhausted!

Yet that enthusiastic group of 5,000 just can't get enough of what they saw the day before. They want more. Spotting the disciples' boat across the sea, they board a fleet of their humble vessels and head toward Capernaum. A little miffed that Jesus snuck off without telling them where he was going, the crowds come clamoring for more food. They want to see another miracle, and they need breakfast! Of course, Jesus sees right through it, knowing them better than they know themselves.

Here in verse 27, Jesus announces the mistake that they–and all of us–so commonly make. We believe the miracle *is* the message. We put our faith in the gift (loaves and fishes), rather than in the giver of the gift (Jesus Christ). The signs that Jesus performs always point to something deeper: abundant life. A way of life where there is always enough for all and we are filled with the promise of eternal life.

The other text that needs some attention this week is the reading from Exodus. The story of manna in the wilderness grounds everything that Jesus will be teaching over the next several Sundays. As a preacher, it is critical to frame Jesus' sign in the gospel as a *continuation* (and not a replacement) of God's promises of abundance and provision that were encountered by Moses and the Israelites. For the next few weeks, be on your guard against amplifying the anti-Jewish sentiment found in parts of John's gospel and the harmful ways these passages have been used to denigrate our Jewish siblings.

The clear parallels between Exodus and John are critical to what Jesus is teaching. Consider, for example, that hungry crowd. Just as the newly fed 5,000 outside Capernaum are clamoring for more food a few hours later, the newly freed Hebrews are wishing they were still in Egypt with plenty to eat! So God sends manna for them to eat, along with some quail meat. But manna is more than simply nutritional; God uses manna as a teaching tool for abundant living, just as Jesus does.

Lutheran pastor and theologian Dan Erlander calls this time between liberation and the promised land "wilderness school." In the wilderness, God's newly freed pupils are invited to build their newfound freedom upon dependance on–and trust in–their Creator. These persecuted people, who for generations have known nothing but scarcity, must learn not to hoard. There will always be enough. Faithful manna gathering and sharing are fundamental practices intended to restore the harmony God created in the beginning, a harmony between the Creator, humanity, and the land. God the Creator and Jesus the Savior are here to teach the same lessons through their generous signs: there is enough for everyone, don't take more than you need, and take time to rest your bodies and the land (jubilee).

Today's gospel reading ends with a verse that will be repeated as an anchor for next week's gospel: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." How might we preachers connect Jesus' proclamation with the invitation to faithful living that is found in our other readings?

One approach could be to follow Jesus' teaching example from the "Book of Signs" by reflecting on bread as a substance that signifies the deep, transformational truth of Christ. Jesus says, "*I am bread*," so what is bread? The story of bread is life and death, transformation from the many into the one. Bread is made from four ingredients: wheat, salt, water, and yeast. First, wheat (which is alive) is harvested (and dies). Salt (Jesus calls us "salt" in Matthew's gospel) brings flavor, vitality, and richness to the bread. Water, like the waters of baptism, draws all of the ingredients (and all of us) together into one loaf. Finally, yeast transforms the dough again by bringing new life into death. The dead wheat becomes food for the living yeast, and the whole thing is leavened as the yeast dies in the oven.

Bread undergoes many miraculous transformations in its process of becoming. Then, bread transforms us. Jesus Christ, the bread of life, has come to feed us with the assurance of God's ongoing provision and faithfulness. This heavenly food

is here to transform us into one body of the baptized that follows in the way of the cross, the way of death and new life.

John Rohde Schwehn

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 8, 2021

1 Kings 19:4–8
Psalm 34:1–8
Ephesians 4:25–5:2
John 6:35, 41–51

Engaging the texts for preaching

For brave preachers committed to following Jesus' five-week sermon on bread, you have now arrived at "hump (Sun) day," the very middle of this incredibly dense but liberating proclamation. Like any meaningful labor we undertake, we may be hitting a wall on how to keep preaching about bread while sustaining the great metaphorical, theological, and scriptural heft of what Jesus is saying. If we're not careful, John 6 could lead us into theological abstractions and jargon that is wholly disconnected from peoples' lives. This would be a mistake. After all, our sacramental theology trains us to resist such abstraction! The bread of life at the center of our Sunday gathering reveals the abundant life of God that is *really* here. It can be touched and tasted, providing nourishment in both a spiritual and a bodily sense.

Therefore, this may be a good week to return to stories of how the bread of abundant life Jesus offers meets us in our daily, lived experiences. Thankfully, the lectionary offers the perfect opportunity for examining both the necessity and impact of daily bread. This week, consider focusing your preaching on Elijah.

But before you do, don't miss the gorgeous poetry of Psalm 34, which frames everything else: "O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him" (Ps 34:8). Before this final verse of the pericope, we learn that the psalmist's life has been spared from a deadly danger. The employment of "taste and see" immediately makes us think of delicious bread, though the use of "taste" here may be intended in a broader sense, as in "try out!" or "experience!"

These verses prepare us for the story of Elijah in 1 Kings. Our frightened prophet has a death sentence on his head after triumphing over the prophets of Baal in a fiery display of YHWH's power on Mount Carmel. Terrified, Elijah hides in the wilderness and collapses under a broom tree. He's exhausted. He doesn't believe he can go on as God's advocate any longer. He's been defiantly standing up to the powerful king Ahab and queen Jezebel for years now, and he wants out.

The remedy to Elijah's ailments of burnout and depression comes in two simple parts: first, take a nap; next, eat a snack. The Divine prescription to overwhelming circumstances is rest and food, satisfying bodily needs with the effect of spiritual rejuvenation.

Perhaps the bread of life that Jesus offers comes as simply as a snack to the weary, a needed moment of respite in the midst of a much longer struggle. It brings to mind a favorite short story titled "A Small, Good Thing," by Raymond Carver. It tells the tragic story of two parents on the morning of their son Scotty's eighth birthday. They order a cake from the local bakery for a party after school. But on Scotty's way to school, he is struck by a car while crossing the street.

Scotty spends several days in the hospital, but he never recovers. As his parents are overwhelmed with grief, they keep receiving harassing late-night phone calls from an unknown caller: "Have you forgotten about Scotty?" After Scotty dies, they realize the mysterious calls have been coming from the birthday cake baker. They had never picked up the cake. They head to the bakery late at night to give this guy a piece of their mind, furious at him for amplifying their questions and grief through these terrible days.

Upon learning what happened, the baker feels terrible. What unfolds next is its own sort of sacrament, a simple meal that comes to these parents as it came to Elijah who received a little cake baked on stones:

> "You probably need to eat something," the baker said. "I hope you'll eat some of my hot rolls. You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this," he said.
>
> He served them warm cinnamon rolls just out of the oven, the icing still runny. He put butter on the table and knives to spread the butter. Then the baker sat down at the table with them. He waited. He waited until they each took a roll from the platter and began to eat. "It's good to eat something," he said, watching them. "There's more. Eat up. Eat all you want. There's all the rolls in the world in here."…
>
> "Smell this," the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. "It's a heavy bread, but rich." They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving.[7]

Eating is a "small, good thing." When we reach out our

7. This story can be accessed online for free at http://creative-writing.qwriting.qc.cuny.edu/files/2012/01/46_2006_carver.pdf

hands to receive that morsel of bread, Christ's body, we receive nourishment only God can provide. It doesn't fix the tragedy or the pain of this life, but it is food for the journey. And, at the baker's table, something even more happens: the baker asks for (and receives) forgiveness.

Jesus, the bread of life, centers our gathering as the church. However, this sacrament also calls us to see the presence of Christ showing up in "small, good things" all around us, all the time.

For me, it was in the offering of food my family recently received–as we do every Ramadan–from our neighbor, Safiya, as they broke the fast. This year, it came at a particularly difficult time for me, having experienced recent disappointment and setbacks in my ministry. But her spongy sour injera bread sopped in a spicy goat and lentil stew filled my soul and gave me the assurance that this too would pass.

I saw the bread of life being offered at the corner of 38th and Chicago in my home city of Minneapolis, now known as George Floyd Square. A community gathered to remember the death of our brother, George, and give thanks for his life, while sharing fragrant and delicious foods both as an act of celebration and as fuel for the work of racial justice that must continue.

Where do you see the "small, good things" of Christ's abundant life showing up in your own community, in your own life? May we be filled with this food, over and over, until that day when all people may never hunger or thirst again.

John Rohde Schwehn

Mary, Mother of Our Lord
August 15, 2021

Isaiah 61:7–11
Psalm 34:1–9
Galatians 4:4–7
Luke 1:46–55

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 15, 2021

Proverbs 9:1–6
Psalm 34:9–14
Ephesians 5:15–20
John 6:51–58

Engaging the Texts

Before addressing the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost texts, I'll mention that this Sunday is also the feast day of Mary, Mother of Our Lord. This Sunday is an important reminder that Mary's song is relevant to us not just in Advent, but can infuse our ordinary time as well. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that the Lord loves justice, and causes righteousness and praise to spring up just as the earth brings forth shoots. And the letter to the Galatians reminds us that we are God's beloved children, recipients of God's grace through Jesus, who was born of Mary. In Luke's gospel, Mary sings that God lifts up the lowly, scatters the proud, and fills the hungry with good things, and we, too, get to participate in this holy work alongside God.

Turning then to the texts for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, this is week four of five in what has been called the "bread weeks"—five weeks at the end of July and into August (Year B) when we hear Jesus talking about bread in the Gospel of John. We first heard John's recounting of the loaves and fishes at the beginning of John 6 a few weeks ago. Then, in the following weeks, we hear about the bread from heaven that endures, Jesus as the bread of life. This week we hear about eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood. (Next week, the final Sunday of the bread weeks, ties all these themes together.)

This is the Sunday when Jesus' discourse about bread gets embodied. Whenever I think that John's Jesus is tending toward the ethereal and philosophical, these moments come along reminding us of the incarnation. Jesus is the Word made flesh, after all, as John proclaimed in his prologue (John 1:14). Eternal life is granted, in this text, in the body.

I don't know that the intended common thread between these lectionary texts is embodiment, but it's there. Wisdom,

an embodied female figure in Proverbs, participates in quotidian human activities: she builds a house, slaughters animals, makes bread and mixes wine for all to drink. Insight and maturity come through the consumption of the bread and wine that she has prepared. The psalm speaks of hunger and satiation, tongues and lips having the power to speak evil or peace—all bodily processes. The letter to the Ephesians extols the embodied practices of being filled with the Spirit: singing songs and hymns, making a melody to the Lord.

One final note this Sunday is the consideration of John's use of "Jews" in this text and elsewhere. It is worth examining the way that pitting the Jews as adversaries of Jesus has led to harm and violence. In this text, the Jews are simply the crowd, those who were witness to the loaves and fishes feeding them and those listening to Jesus. Crowd, community, Judeans—all would be accurate descriptions of those gathered.

Pastoral Reflections

This year, I revisited a book I had read a while ago about bodies and trauma called *The Body Keeps the Score* by Dutch psychologist Bessel van der Kolk.[8] The title of the book describes the basic premise: all that we experience, especially trauma, gets stored in our bodies, and often the way to heal trauma is through embodied, somatic practices.

We are marked in our bodies with so much: scars from wounds both physical and emotional; the stress or tension we have been carrying from living life, especially those living life shaped by centuries of unjust policies and systems. Another book I'm in the middle of reading is *My Grandmother's Hands* by Resmaa Manakem,[9] which takes many of the concepts from van der Kolk's book and looks at them through the lens of intergenerational racial trauma. We carry the emotional scars in our bodies not just from the things that have happened to us, but from systemic and personal trauma that has been passed down through generations.

We carry these traumas and stresses in our bodies, and we also carry promises and healing in our bodies. We are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever, as our baptism liturgy says, on our foreheads, on our bodies. Promises of salvation and forgiveness get ingested by our bodies, Jesus' embodied self in our embodied selves, as our gospel text explains. These promises—that we are beloved children of God, that each of us is living and breathing this belovedness, that all of our cells are buzzing with God's love—that is what this embodied Jesus brings us this week as he speaks of these living, breathing promises.

8. Bessel van der Kolk. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

9. Resmaa Menakem. *My Grandmother's Hands*. (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017).

So too, then, Mary the mother of Jesus is a participant in this embodiment. Both as the God-bearer, *theotokos*, and also as an embodied person herself. She brought the Son of God into the world with her very own body, her bloodstream and hormones intertwined with this baby, Emmanuel, God-with-us, and to paraphrase Jesus from the gospel for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, God-within-us.

The Rev. Elise Pokel and her husband, Andy, wrote and recorded a compline service for Holy Week this past year, shared through Luther Seminary and Augsburg University. This liturgy focused on Holy Week through Mary's eyes, heart, voice, and body.[10] As I listened to it on Holy Saturday, one song stopped me in my tracks. Elise sang a song they had written to the tune of "Were You There," traditionally sung on Good Friday. Their song begins (hear the tune in your head) "were you there when she dreamed about her son?" Mary dreamed, felt, birthed, and mourned the death of her son in her body. Jesus walked alongside us, died, and was resurrected in his body. We, too, have the promises of new life written into our bodies, known to us in glimpses through water, bread, and wine, and made known to the world as we live out this love.

Miriam Samuelson-Roberts

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost August 22, 2021

Joshua 24:1–2a, 14–18
Psalm 34:15–22
Ephesians 6:10–20
John 6:56–69

Hopefully you looked ahead for preaching this summer to know this long chapter from John is distributed over several weeks, all of it a conversation from Jesus about the bread from heaven. In this last segment, what remains to be said?

Theological Reflection

These verses revisit the ancestors' theme (v 58, cf v 31) and the bread from heaven they called "manna." Jesus says he is not that bread. What is the new thing God is doing here in Jesus, and how is it the same as and different from what God was doing in Exodus 16? Remembering that the Ark of the Covenant was a sacred container that held both the tablets of the law and some of that desert manna, can a comparison be made with Jesus as the "container" that holds new versions of

10. https://liturgyofthehours.libsyn.com/website/holy-week-compline

both law and bread of heaven?

To make this more difficult, consider that this verb, *trogo,* is literally "gnaw, nibble, or munch."[11] Thankfully the listeners in the story ask the question burning in our minds: "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" While it may not be helpful to make the story more difficult by offering "gnaw" as a translation, even something we hear regularly, "Take, eat, this is my body," is disturbing, if we stop to think about it. This sermon might be the stopping-to-think-about-it moment, creating space for how difficult it is. What does it mean to believe these things? Is it a literal thing, an academic thing, a symbolic thing to "take and eat"? Since John's gospel does not include the Last Supper before the arrest and crucifixion, is this chapter John's version of the institution of the eucharist?

Another possible theological theme is Jesus' assertion that by eating flesh and drinking blood we *abide* in him and he in us. Abiding is an important theme in John's gospel, used forty times and translated from *meno* as abide, stay, continue, remain, dwell, or endure. This difficult teaching isn't simply a test to pass; it's the way that we are present in the world as followers of Jesus, and that Jesus is present in the world as the body of Christ. This abiding is about being in a particular location and about being in the Spirit, about longevity and ongoing relationship, about being rooted in Someone even as we are sent out from that Someone. It is mutual—what we do in Christ and what Christ does in us.

Pastoral Reflections

As much as we preachers might roll our eyes every third year in August, these questions are real for people who hear us, both inside and outside faith traditions. How in the world can we believe this? What does it really mean, "eat my flesh and drink my blood?" Those who have grown up with a tradition of Holy Communion don't often stop to examine it but accept it as a "mystery of the faith." But for those who hear these words or observe our traditions from outside, something that is normal and makes sense to us becomes an obstacle.

I had this conversation with a confirmation family once. The Jewish parent of the student was reluctant for the child to receive first communion, although baptism a decade earlier had not been an issue. It was the "cannibalism" that was the stumbling block. I struggled with how to talk about communion in less gory terms and thought about how love is given in the body. We give our bodies for pleasure, yes, but also for protection, putting ourselves between our loved ones and harm; for nurture, when mothers carry, deliver, and feed children; and for belonging, when we know who we are because someone else's body is near. "I love you, body and soul" starts to get at the bodily-ness of communion. There is nothing God won't give us to be sure we get this holy love, including Christ's own body. This, perhaps, is another example of mutual abiding.

For a larger sacramental exploration, Joshua 24 might be read as an affirmation of baptism ritual. As God's people prepare for something entirely new, something for which they have waited for longer than their own lifetimes, they remember, retell, and recommit to God who has done great things for them, though not without difficulty. Perhaps the John text comes from a similar posture of affirmation of what God has done and is doing in this messy life.

Sometimes obeying God, following Jesus, and going where the Spirit sends us is hard, inconvenient, or dangerous, even; but we don't have to understand it to do it. The part of faith that is trust compels us when logic might prevent us. Sometimes we do it first: we practice the faith before we can explain it and it is that practice that leads us to understanding. Sacraments are like that: we don't fully comprehend what baptism and communion are all about, but because we participate in them, we begin to glimpse what God is doing for us, to us, and through us. I liken this to love—we know what love is because someone loves us in real and tangible ways, not because someone explained it to us. This divine love abides in us as beloveds of God, and we embody that love in our bodies—flesh and blood—as the body of Christ.

Lori Ruge-Jones

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 29, 2021

Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–9
Psalm 15
James 1:17–27
Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

Engaging the texts for preaching

The lectionary did a fine job of carving up the Mark passage. Hearing the excerpts chosen you would never know that Jesus is addressing three distinct audiences. (I will be adding a couple of minutes to worship by using Mark 7:1–23 in unabridged form.) The audiences shift as follows: First Jesus addresses the Pharisees and scribes, responding to their question. Then he goes over the same theme for the crowds who have been spectators in that conflict. Finally, he addresses the disciples, surprised and puzzled that they do not understand what he just has taught. Perhaps the disciples' confusion is the most frustrating, since they been taught by Jesus for seven chapters

11. Walter Bauer, F. W. Gingrich, and Frederick Danker. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. rev. (University of Chicago Press, 1958).

and still have not grasped his message.

Some interpreters see this story as a set up to make the Pharisees and scribes look bad. A few even think the disciples are portrayed as dense so as to challenge their ongoing authority. I have a different take: All controversies that appear in a given gospel indicate that the followers of Jesus who first heard the gospel were themselves still struggling with the issues at hand, in this case, literally at hand. Jesus-followers decades after his death and resurrection were still asking why ritual hand washing did not matter in their movement as it had among the elders whom they once (and still?) looked to for guidance. If my assumption is correct, then given one of the scenes deleted by the lectionary, those listeners to this gospel were still asking how to negotiate commitments made to the larger faith community (*corban*) and those made to their specific family (7:9-13).

We all have traditions that we have inherited that we believe should go away; we all also live out of traditions we have inherited that continue to serve us well. Negotiating what should stay and what should go is never easy, especially in a community of the faithful where discernment diverges in terms of such things. We hold traditions precious because they have been so important in our own lives. Some traditions may have saved us in times when everything else was falling apart.

In addition, those of us who consider ourselves progressive have the tradition of believing every tradition should be evolving. That tradition has trouble contending with Deuteronomy's determination to maintain the law without addition or subtraction (Deut 4:2), although we do uphold some traditions across circumstances and centuries such James' call to care for widows and orphans (James 1:27).

Every character in this story would agree upon one thing: don't teach human traditions as though God had chiseled them in stone. In fact, the Pharisees and scribes are concerned that Jesus is the one teaching traditions of his own invention.

What is more, we could easily ask how Jesus is doing on the hypocrisy front. He is the one who called James and John away from their family fishing work to dedicate themselves to his project (Mark 1:19–20). How is that different than the practice of *corban*? Later he left his mother and siblings outside of his circle when they came looking for him (Mark 3:33–35). Next week we will see the challenge even more acutely when Jesus lets some rather unclean words come out of his own mouth, aimed pointedly at a Syrophoenician woman and her daughter. The words of response that fly out of her mouth force him to revise his own operative tradition. Figuring out when our hearts are far from God is complicated. No doubt, we would rather spot that problem in others.

A faithful reading aloud and preaching on this Scripture will reveal that this story is more complicated if we don't assume that Jesus wins this argument hands down (and dirty). The challenge for preachers is to figure out the sacred traditions we ourselves cling to as though our salvation depends on them. We could generate a whole list of things that the hypocrites of the past or in the church across the street have over-embraced. We also could name traditions our congregants cling to long after their expiration date. But what if we could see where we ourselves delight in washing our hands to the elbow? This is much harder work. If we can speak the words of Jesus' interlocutors as though their concerns have at least as much legitimacy as our own beloved traditions, then maybe Jesus' challenge might gain a bit more traction and weight in the hearing. On the other hand, if we tell the story in such a way that no one in the congregation can see even an ounce of reason in Jesus' opponents, then we will not hear the challenge that Jesus brings to us and our fetishes of faith. We will shake our heads at those foolish hypocrites of days gone by and leave our own obsessions unattended.

That kind of telling arrogantly dismisses those who disagree with us without even wondering about what they have seen that we have missed. The perpetuation of pointless polemics keeps us from joining forces where agreement could be found such as, one hopes, in the care of widows and orphans.

Ruge-Jones has a performance of this passage available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7vrpBRkPkM&list=PLyGqSCYR2c6oQEKwtxK6_Ms3FZ2w94yoK&index=7&t=47s

Phil Ruge-Jones

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 5, 2021

Isaiah 35:4–7a
Psalm 146
James 2:1–10, (11–13), 14–17
Mark 7:24–37

Engaging the texts for preaching

The first reading from Isaiah was appointed as a companion to the two healing stories in the gospel. We usually hear this Isaiah text during Advent so it may seem out of place in September. Actually, Isaiah 35 is a word out of place in the canon, a surprise in the midst of judgment and warfare. Most commentators agree that this chapter comes from a later time, perhaps after exile. Promises of healing are both wonderful and troubling. There are people in the sanctuary who cannot hear or see or walk. In worship today, consider using a litany such as the following to remind people that God's community

is more expansive than even the Isaiah could imagine:

> Then the blind woman and her dog
> **shall process with the choir;**
> the deaf man who sees what we often miss
> **shall paint the text on the sanctuary walls;**
> the veteran in the wheelchair
> **shall break the bread of life,**
> and the homeless man who cannot speak
> **shall sign the hymns for everyone to see.**

Starting last Sunday, the Second Readings are from the book of James. Today's reading from chapter 2 may be especially challenging for Lutherans! "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:17). This little book is worth a series of sermons on the Sundays of September. What is the connection between faith and works? How can our congregation be as serious as James is about welcoming poor people into our midst? If we send worshippers out saying, "Go in peace. Remember the poor," shouldn't we respond, "Yes! We will!"?

The Gospel reading from Mark 7 is equally challenging. Jesus comes off rather badly in his encounter with the Syrophoenician woman. In the creed we say that Jesus became "truly human," but we don't want him to be too human. So over the years, people have tried to clean this up. Here are a few things I may have tried myself: Jesus was testing this woman to see if she had enough faith. When she passed the test, Jesus healed her daughter. But we have no idea what she believed; she doesn't say anything about her faith! There's another option for making Jesus' words less offensive. The Greek word *kunarios*—translated "dogs"—really means little dogs, puppies. So, when Jesus tells the woman, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," he really means little puppies. Does that help? There's one more possibility. Because this woman bows down before Jesus, this is a story about submission. She submits to Jesus' authority, so Jesus heals her daughter.

But Mark didn't clean up the story. Jesus demeaned this woman and Mark didn't erase what he said. "Now the woman was a Gentile"—that would have been enough, but Mark goes on—"a Gentile of Syrophoenician origin." The Greek actually says Syrophoenician "by race." This woman is not one of Jesus' people. She is not from Galilee and she is not Jewish. Should we be surprised? Jesus has come into her homeland. He's a visitor; she's at home.

But she is desperate for her daughter's healing. She barges in without invitation. A pushy Gentile woman. This feisty mother takes Jesus' exclusionary put-down and turns it into a metaphor of inclusion: "We're happy to feed the dogs and you should be happy to heal my daughter!" In Mark's gospel there are only two times when women speak: the women on the way to the tomb ask one another, "Who will roll away the stone?" and the Syrophoenician woman says, "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."[12]

"For saying that, you may go," Jesus said. For saying what? Not a word about faith or conversion. "For saying that, you may go." That is, for speaking the truth. The children have been fed—5000 of them on the hillside. Twelve baskets of food left over, surely there's enough for me. Now, feed me and my daughter.

This is a turning point in Jesus' ministry. Usually we point to Peter's confession in chapter 8 as the fulcrum of this gospel. But in many ways Mark's gospel turns on this encounter between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman. Jesus was converted that day to a larger vision of the commonwealth of God. The Syrophoenician woman was his teacher. This is evident in where Mark places the story. In the very next chapter, there is another feeding story. This time 4,000 people are fed. After everyone had eaten, there were seven baskets left over. Seven—the number of wholeness, completeness, a number encompassing the nations. Mark has placed the story of Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman between these two feeding stories—one with twelve baskets left over for the people of Israel, the other with seven baskets left over for the nations, including people who will hear your preaching. This story is also for women who are still begging for more than crumbs from ecclesiastical tables.

Today, preacher, you have three compelling scripture texts. Which will you choose? No doubt that will depend on what's happening in your corner of God's commonwealth.

Barbara Lundblad

12. Joan Mitchell, *Beyond Fear and Silence: A Feminist-Literary Reading of Mark* (Continuum, 2001),108. (Mitchell credits Joanna Dewey, "Women in the Synoptic Gospels: Seen but Not Heard" in *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture,* May 1, 1997.)

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 12, 2021

Isaiah 50:4–9a
Psalm 116:1–9
James 3:1–12
Mark 8:27–38

Engaging the texts for preaching

Again this Sunday we have three readings that could each be the focus for a sermon. **Isaiah 50** is paired with Jesus' prediction of suffering and rejection in Mark (Isa 50:5–8, Mark 7:31). But that First Reading begins, not with suffering, but with a wonderful affirmation: "The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word." We preachers may hear this verse as a bold "yes" to our own preaching/teaching vocation. Or it may be that we are the weary ones, longing to be sustained by a word from a friend or colleague, or from God.

But the Second Reading from **James 3** argues with Isaiah's positive image of the teacher: "Not many of you should become teachers…for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." (James 3:1) That verse challenges those of us who preach and teach: how are we being judged for what we say to the people in our care? The rest of this chapter focuses on the harm that can be done by the tongue, so small yet so dangerous. These verses offer vivid similes for keeping the tongue in check: like the bridle in a horse's mouth, like the small rudder guiding a big ship—for the tongue is like a small fire that can set the forest ablaze. Think of the harm that has been done by harsh political put-downs and lies about everything from election results to the attack on the capitol. People in the congregation may know the pain of cutting remarks made behind their backs or to their faces, even within the community of faith. A sermon on the power of our small tongues to inflict harm or healing can be both pastoral and prophetic.

Mark 8 brings us with Jesus and his disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi. It is an odd destination, way north of their home base in Capernaum. It is north of the Sea of Galilee by many miles, north of the base of Mt. Hermon, almost to the border with Lebanon and Syria. The region was named by Phillip II, son of Herod the Great. He named it in honor of Caesar Augustus and himself! Caesarea Philippi was not where we would expect Jesus to go.

It was here in Caesarea Philippi that Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They gave several answers—John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets. Then Jesus asked another question, "Who do you say that I am?" Only one word is different, but that one word makes all the difference. Without hesitation, Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." And Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him (but he didn't say Peter's answer was wrong).

"Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." Note that he didn't call himself "Messiah," rather he chose "Son of Man." Jesus said this very openly. It was the first time he predicted what would happen to him. Peter must have been knocked off his certainty: such a fate would never happen to the Messiah. The Messiah would restore the throne of David and throw off the yoke of Roman oppression. The Messiah was God's chosen, for the very word meant "the one anointed."

"Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus yelled, not off to the side, but in front of all the disciples. Jesus is as angry as he ever gets in the gospels, as angry as when he casts out demons, angrier than he is with religious opponents. "Get behind me, Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

But Peter thought he was in touch with divine things! He knew who Jesus was—just as surely as Jesus knew when he heard God speak from the heavens: "You are my Son, the beloved. With you I am well-pleased." But immediately after his baptism the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. For forty days he was tempted by Satan, but temptation did not end when forty days were up. Jesus would be tempted for the rest of his life, tempted to be someone other than the Beloved Child of God.

He would be tempted even by those closest to him. What did it mean to be God's Beloved Son? What did it mean to be Messiah, the Anointed One? "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus cried out. He wasn't equating Peter with Satan, but crying out at Satan's presence in his life at every turn, even among those closest to him. "Get behind me, Satan." Don't let me fall into the traps of power and might. Don't entice me with this world's honor and glory.

All of this took place at Caesarea Philippi, dedicated to the powers of the Roman Empire. Jesus' question echoes down to our own time. "Who do you say that I am?" Here in this particular place Jesus was saying, "I am not John the Baptist. I am not Elijah or one of the prophets. I am not Philip, Son of Herod the Great. I am not Caesar Augustus, Emperor of Rome."

If we are looking for that kind of power and glory, we need to look somewhere else.

Barbara Lundblad

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 19, 2021

Jeremiah 11:18–20
Psalm 54
James 3:13–4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30–37

Engaging the gospel text for preaching

The ninth chapter of Mark is enough to give readers whiplash! This chapter began on the mountain as Jesus' clothes became dazzling white and he talked with Moses and Elijah. Three disciples—Peter, James, and John—were there. They saw that amazing vision and heard God's voice from the cloud: "This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him." But that vision soon came crashing down to earth—a big, needy crowd; people arguing, and a boy thrown on the ground because of seizures. Soon Jesus was talking about betrayal and suffering, being killed and rising again. This is the second time Jesus had said these things, but the disciples didn't understand. When they got to Capernaum, Jesus asked them "What were you arguing about on the way?" They were silent and Jesus knew why: they'd been arguing about who was the greatest. Maybe some of them finally heard the part about rising again. If that ever happened, they surely wanted to be part of his inner circle!

How could Jesus ever get through to them? Once more, he tried: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Their eyes started to glaze over for they'd heard these opposites before—to save life/lose life, to be first/be last, to be great/be a servant. They had argued about who was greatest of all and Jesus called them to be last of all. Jesus could see they didn't get it. So, he took a little child in his arms and put the child in their midst. Who was this child? Perhaps the child of one of the women who was part of Jesus' community. Perhaps a relative of Jesus, since he was now at home in Capernaum.

Whoever this child was, Jesus saw the child**.** This child was as important to him as the vision on the mountain. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Peter, James, and John had heard the voice from the cloud. They knew who sent Jesus. Maybe they closed their eyes to bring back the vision. When they opened their eyes, they saw Jesus with a child on his lap.

Jesus wanted them to see this vision, too. He wanted them to see the child. He wants us to see the child, too—and welcome the child. Not because the child is innocent or perfect or pure or naturally religious. Jesus had no romantic notions about childhood. Jesus wanted them to welcome the child because the child was at the bottom of the social heap. In Mark children are often sick or disabled: Jairus' daughter is near death, the Syrophoenician woman's daughter is possessed by an unclean spirit. Just before today's text, a man brings to Jesus his son who had suffered horrific convulsions since childhood. Children in Mark are not symbols of holiness or innocence but more often victims of poverty and disease. Jesus brings the child from the margins into the very center. This child is not a symbol but a person, a little person easily overlooked, often unseen and unheard.

But surely, we are different. We value children in church and in society. We pray for those awaiting the birth of a child and celebrate all the babies born this past year. But there are mixed messages about children in the public arena. If we listen to many Christian voices, it's clear that the worst thing that can happen to children is being born. Before birth, they are cherished, but after birth, they're on their own. Jesus wants us to see the children, to bring them from the margins and hold them on our laps. To make sure they have enough to eat and a place to sleep that's warmer and safer than the streets.

"Whoever welcomes this child welcomes me," said Jesus, "and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Surely now the disciples will get it. But in the very next chapter when children come to Jesus for a blessing, the disciples speak sternly to them.

Jesus was not a hopeless romantic when he set a little child in the midst of his disciples. He was not a hopeless romantic—Jesus was a hopeful fanatic! I mean fanatic in the best sense. Jesus was fanatic about opening up the commonwealth of God to those nobody wanted to see, fanatic about honoring children and others considered no more than property. Jesus didn't follow the rubrics or the rules. He taught us that all our arguments about greatness mean nothing if we don't stoop low enough to see the invisible ones in our midst. That day in Capernaum Jesus held a little child in his arms and brought the words of heaven down to earth. I can imagine him whispering in the child's ear the same words he heard when he was baptized: "You are God's Beloved child."

Then Jesus looked over the child's shoulder at his disciples. Even farther off and centuries later, Jesus is looking at us. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." To see and welcome and care for those called "least" among us is never simple. We might not be able to do it at all—unless we're willing to become hopeful fanatics.

Barbara Lundblad

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 26, 2021

Numbers 11:4–6, 10–16, 24–29
Psalm 19:7–14
James 5:13–20
Mark 9:38–50

Engaging the texts for preaching

The name of the book of Numbers in Hebrew is "In the Wilderness." The book narrates the time between liberation from Egypt and arrival in the promised land. The people are "on the way" to their destination. Daniel Erlander has labeled this time as "the wilderness school."[13] The people are practicing what it's like to be a people of faith, which always sounds better in theory than it does when it must be lived in community.

It's only been three days since the people left Mount Sinai. Already there is a "rabble" who actively stir up the people's discontent. Moses is overwhelmed by the challenge and is ready to quit. Leadership in the covenant community is hard. Sometimes it's tough to believe that a loving God can call good people into a ministry that's so exasperating. Perhaps Moses would have benefited from Clinical Pastoral Education. He's taken on too much. He assumes that God's work is his work and that he's responsible for the people's happiness.

The solution, of course, is to share and distribute the responsibility, the challenge, and the power of leadership. This is part of what the covenant community begins to learn in the wilderness. God's people are not to be led only by one charismatic leader but by many—most whose names we don't even know. This theme is played out both in the gospel text and in the reading from James, where leadership is assumed to be communal, collaborative, and relational.

This is underscored as the story in Numbers progresses. The seventy are gathered at the center of the camp where holiness is constellated. They are given a portion of Moses' spirit, yet this power is immediately misunderstood as a privilege, something to be controlled and protected. As it turns out, there are two poetic prophets with rhyming names who get the same spirit even though they are outside the boundaries of holiness. Eldad and Medad, located among the people, perhaps even near the rabble, get the spirit, too.

This bothers Joshua and his seventy comrades. They demand that this power from the edges and boundaries, be silenced. Yet Moses now takes his place as the extraordinary leader, wishing out loud, "O that all God's people were prophets—all of them filled with prophetic and spiritual power."

13. Daniel Erlander, *Manna and Mercy: A Brief History of God's Unfolding Promise to Mend the Entire Universe* (The Order of Saints Martin and Teresa, Mercer Island, Washington, 1972), 7.

This is also the issue in the gospel text in Mark. The disciples are disturbed that someone else is doing the work of God's commonwealth. All along the disciples had been looking for a way to make themselves great. Readers of the gospel should give their best whine when reading v. 38. Doesn't being with Jesus make us entitled to be special? Doesn't being a follower of Jesus set us apart from the rabble, the ones who don't have our insider-y wisdom? Both Jesus and Moses are willing to recognize God's work in whoever embodies it. They see the commonwealth of God as something wider, larger, and more productive than even they can see.

The reading from James trains our eyes on where to look: where there is cheerfulness, hope, concern for the suffering, healing, forgiveness, prayer, and a commitment to reconciliation. This may be an important message for our interfaith, multicultural, multiethnic world: God's project of mercy, love, justice, and compassion is already at work in more complex and effective ways than even the God-chosen institutions can manage. God's prophetic and spiritual power runs both *within* the structured arrangements for leadership and *outside* its boundaries. The church would be wise to recognize both these dynamics, trusting that faithfulness comes as they are held together.

Without this wider lens, power becomes privileged entitlement that will most inevitably be a stumbling block, both for those who have it and those who don't. Unrecognized privilege may well be the millstone around the neck of the church, at least the white church. Certainly, it is the stumbling block that has caused many "little ones" to experience suffering, rejection, pain, and injustice.

For those with privilege, this is hard work. When you've been at the center or near enough to the top to believe you deserve it, there's loss in discovering that faithfulness inevitably means leaving something behind, even becoming dis-abled for the sake of the gospel. Cutting off those things that give us a leg up feels like a kind of amputation. It feels like entering life only half-able to participate. Yet, this is precisely what the economic, political, cultural systems do to many already.

Mark seems to be suggesting that listening to voices outside the established boundaries or being willing to see God's work happening around us is exactly how we begin to avoid becoming arrogant, privileged stumbling stones. This is part of our work "on the way" to Jerusalem or the promised land or anywhere the church is headed. The only way to stop being stumbling blocks is to listen to the people who are being crushed under the weight of oppression, violence, inequality, and political structures that give power to some and not to others; nations or communities that operate with the same arrogant standards as the fearful seventy or the grandiose twelve. Oh, that all people could prophesy with that vision!

Bradley Schmeling