

# Preaching Helps

## Eighth Sunday after Pentecost — Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

### Searching for Women in Ordinary Time

In her introduction to this issue of *Currents*, Mary Streufert closed with these words: “My hope is that the Christian community takes ever more seriously the faithful re-formation of language, imagery, and faith in which God is always at work.” Hopefully this issue will encourage preachers and musicians to open congregations to fuller ways of speaking, singing, and praying to God. Preachers have a unique opportunity to introduce new metaphors for God because our sermons aren’t printed in the hymnal! Brian Wren took a phrase from “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” for the title of his book: *What Language Shall I Borrow? God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology*. He borrowed language from the hymn to ask a question preachers are encouraged to ask: what language shall I borrow? What images and metaphors might open people to see God in new ways? What stories will people hear?

Preachers are encouraged to look ahead to the coming Sundays and ask: “Are there any women here?” Biblical texts include far more men than women. So when a woman comes into view, preach on that text whether she appears in the First or Second Reading or the Gospel. Looking ahead we find at least five Sundays where women are in the text—sometimes in two texts on one Sunday! On **July 17** the Genesis 18 text focuses on Abraham with a brief mention of Sarah. I encourage you to read more of her story in the verses that follow. The Gospel reading that Sunday is the story of Mary and Martha: how can preachers avoid pitting women against each other? Perhaps we can create a *midrash* in which Jesus invites Martha to sit down and says, “Let me make the salad.” **August 14** brings us to Jesus’ difficult words about family divisions. This can be a day to challenge the claim that it’s easy to find “Christina Family Values” in the Bible. That same Sunday the Hebrews reading includes one verse about Rahab as exemplar of faithfulness (Heb 11:31). In the midst of all those men, this foreign woman is remembered. What other women would you add to this list of the “great cloud of witnesses?” On **August 21** Jesus cures a woman who had long been bent-down. When she stood up straight after eighteen years, she began to praise God, but we don’t know what she said. You might imagine her words: “People talked over my back as though I wasn’t even there.” This can be a day to challenge negative views of disabilities. [See Nancy Eiseland, *The Disabled God* and Nancy Mairs,

*Waist-high in the World*.]

On **September 11** we hear Jesus’ parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. This is an example of Luke’s pairing of male and female stories. Why is this woman so desperate to find one lost coin? Where did she get her money? What are other women desperately looking for? **October 2** is the last Sunday featured in this issue: don’t overlook the reading from 2 Timothy (even if you’ve decided Timothy is anti-women!) The writer begins this letter to Timothy honoring the witness of his mother, Lois, and his grandmother, Eunice (2 Tim 1:5) This is one of those rare places where two women are remembered by name. Who has passed on the faith to you? Are there any women on your list?

From July to October preachers can tell the stories of Sarah, Mary and Martha, Rahab, a bent-down woman who stood up, a woman who searched for a coin, and Timothy’s teachers Lois and Eunice. That’s eight women in fourteen Sundays—more than half!

We welcome new writers and familiar names to this issue of “Preaching Helps.” **Amy Lindeman Allen**, an ELCA pastor, is an adjunct professor at Columbia Theological Seminary. She recently received her PhD in New Testament from Vanderbilt University Graduate School and is interested in inclusive, justice-oriented readings of Scripture with a focus on the place and voices of children. Her lectionary reflections can be found at Political Theology’s *There is Power in the Blog*, where she is a regular contributor to their Scripture section.

**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 book *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A* will be out soon. He and his wife, Ruth, live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church.

**Javen Swanson** is associate pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in St. Paul. Prior to ordination, he was a community organizer with OutFront Minnesota and Minnesotans United for All Families, and later with the National LGBTQ Task Force. He is a graduate of Gustavus Adolphus College and Yale Divinity School.

**Brad Froslee** enjoys serving the community at Calvary Lutheran Church in south Minneapolis. The congregation continues to explore ways faith is being lived out and shared in an urban setting. Creating an inclusive and welcoming community, lifting up children and youth, speaking and working for racial, environmental and LGBTQ justice, and proclaiming a word of grace are hallmarks of the congregation. Brad grew up on a farm outside the small town of Vining, Minnesota (population 82), and studied at St. Olaf College and Harvard Divinity School. He has a passion for preaching, worship, and

engaging in the call to be a new and renewed community.

**Wilk Miller**, an ELCA pastor, has served congregations in suburban Philadelphia, downtown Washington, D.C., inner-city Philadelphia and most recently, San Diego. After eleven years as pastor of First Lutheran Church, San Diego, he was recently called to be the pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity in New York City where he and his wife, Dagmar, moved at the end of June.

**Melanie Heuser Hill** is pastor of Faith and Community Formation at Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. She both thinks and preaches in stories. Her first novel (for kids), *Giant Pumpkin Suite*, is forthcoming from Candlewick Press Fall 2017.

*Barbara K. Lundblad*  
Editor, "Preaching Helps"

## Eighth Sunday after Pentecost July 10, 2016

**Deuteronomy 30:9–14**

**Psalm 25:1–10**

**Colossians 1:1–14**

**Luke 10:25–37**

### Engaging the Texts

In our global and digital world information is literally at our fingertips. There are more words and ideas accessible to me through my computer at this moment than what I am able to process in my lifetime. Through social media and face time I can connect with friends across the globe. I often do so with more regularity than I speak to my next-door neighbor.

So, when Moses speaks of the Word of God as “near” us (Deut 30:14) and the Samaritan comes “near” the ravaged man in Jesus’ parable (Luke 10:33), I cannot help but ponder the theme of proximity. What does it mean to be near or far from one another? From God’s Word? How are we to understand closeness in the Kingdom of God?

There is, of course, the obvious answer in Jesus’ parable that the one who shows mercy is the neighbor to the man in need (Luke 10:36–37). This, however, skips over the question of how the Samaritan came to be near this man in the first place. After all, each of the three men who passed by the victim on the road was equally “near” him upon their approach.

Jesus tells us that when the Levite “came to the place” (*kata ton topon elthon*) he, as also the priest before him, passed by on the other side. Whereas, when the Samaritan “came near him” (*elthon kat’ auton*) he was moved with pity. The same construction is used in the Greek for both, only the Samaritan is said to have come near “him” (*auton*), whereas the Levite merely

comes near “the place” (*ton topon*).

This, I think, is at the heart of what it means to be a neighbor—of the precondition for the acts of mercy that Jesus commends the young lawyer to perform. To be “near” another person means not simply to exist in physical proximity to him or her, but to recognize that person *as* a person, as a fellow human being, rather than simply an object or figure who may happen to be in a particular place.

Likewise, to hold the Word of God “near” us means more than having a Bible on our desk or in an app on our smartphone. To hold the Word of God “on our lips and in our hearts” means to recognize it as a part of us, a part of what makes me the *person* who I am—created in the image of God in all my particularity.

So, I think, proximity in God’s Kingdom, has something important to do with particularity. With personhood. With *choosing* amid all the other distractions to notice the *person* in whatever place we may find them.

### Pastoral Reflections

One of my favorite Dr. Seuss stories is *The Sneetches*. There are two kinds of Sneetches: those with and without stars on their bellies. The Star-Belly Sneetches fancy themselves better than the others, so “Whenever they met some [plain belly Sneetches], when they were out walking, they’d hike right on past them, without even talking.”<sup>1</sup>

But then a salesman comes to town with a “Star On” and “Star Off” machine. In no time at all, the Sneetches become so mixed up that they can no longer tell by the stars on their bellies which Sneetches are which. The end result, in good children’s story fashion, is that all of the Sneetches get along.

In the real world, identity politics are not so easy to overcome. And yet, there is a lesson in the Sneetches. When they couldn’t tell with whom they were “supposed” to associate, the Sneetches were forced to start *talking* to everyone. They began to recognize the personhood (or, “Sneetch-hood”) of one another.

The Star On and Star Off machine forces the Sneetches to, in the words of Jesus’ parable, “come near” to one another. And they do so just long enough to realize that the “other” may not be so different after all.

As election season gears up, as immigration debates continue to fester, and as we ponder what it means to be “neighbors,” we too are faced with a lot of differences. In the midst of so much difference it may even seem impossible to show mercy or act with love toward those who are most different from us.

But the good news of the gospel is that God doesn’t leave it up to us. As we hear in Deuteronomy, God makes the first move by *coming near to us*. Across whatever barriers, whether the heavens or the seas, God’s word reaches *us*. God doesn’t

1. Dr. Seuss, *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1961).

keep on hiking, God doesn't stay aloof in heaven, God stoops, God stops, and God speaks to *us*—whoever we are, wherever we are, and whatever we might have to say about it.

But unlike the Sneetches' magical machine, God does not purport to remove our differences. God created each of us unique for a reason. Rather, God, in God's stopping, *celebrates* each of us in our differences. This is what the believers in Colossae model in their love for "all the saints" (Col 1:4). It is what the Samaritan models when he stops along the road long enough to notice another person in need. And it is what we are called to do as we draw near both to one another, and through each other, to God.

Amy Lindeman Allen

## Ninth Sunday after Pentecost July 17, 2016

Genesis 18:1–10a

Psalms 15

Colossians 1:15–28

Luke 10:38–42

### Engaging the Texts

In the Jewish tradition, the first commandment begins not with "The Lord is God," but rather, "Hear, O Israel, The Lord is God" (Deut 6:4). This is called the *Shema*, after the Hebrew word for "hear" (*shema*). It is the same word used in Genesis to describe Sarah listening to the word of the Lord at the entrance of her tent.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus declares that "those who *hear* the word of God and obey it" are blessed (Luke 11:28). The Greek word (*akouo*) is the same word used to translate both Hebrew passages into Greek. It is also the same word used to describe Mary at Jesus' feet (10:39) and the peoples' hearing of the gospel at Colossae (Col 1:23).

To hear the word of the Lord, therefore, is clearly significant. But it is perhaps Colossians that gives us the greatest understanding for why. The author assures the congregation that they are now reconciled in Christ, who is in them, "the hope of glory" (Col 1:27). He explains, "It is [Christ] whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Col 1:28).

To hear, in other words, is not simply to receive audio signals—it is to process and accept. To *hear* the word of God is to believe that *the Lord is God* and to respond accordingly. This is why Jews include it within the first commandment itself, rather than as a preface to the commandments. Because *listening* is not a prerequisite for faithful action, it is the beginning

of faithful action itself.

And so, in our readings, when two characters are described as *listening* to the word of the Lord, it is worth some attention. We know that these characters share much in common: the act of listening, the presence of God in their homes, and their subservience in the hierarchy of their homes respectively to Abraham and Martha.

We also know that Sarah was "advanced in age" (Gen 18:11) when she heard the Lord speak to Abraham. On the other hand, Luke doesn't explicitly mention the age of Mary; but it is possible that due to her status in her sister's house and her freedom to sit at the feet of Jesus that she would have been considerably younger in age—maybe even a child. Thus, these two characters, with so much in common, stand in two opposite poles of lifespan; God speaks to them, and they *listen*.

Of course, listening is not the end of faith—both Luke and Genesis acknowledge that there must also be action. But this listening, this holy attentiveness, is both the beginning and the end.

### Pastoral Reflections

In our lives so crammed with other noises, it can often be difficult to listen. Too often I catch myself when I am supposed to be listening to someone, already planning in my head what my answer will be before they finish their question. The proliferation of smartphones and Apple watches tempts us to multitask while we're listening, whether we're in a classroom, in front of the television, or sitting down for a family dinner.

And that's just listening to what's going on right in front of us. Listening to God? That's a whole other story. Often, in my busy, chaos-filled existence it is difficult enough to carve out time for prayer to *talk* to God, let alone the additional time and focus required to actually listen.

Increasingly, people tell me that they don't know *how* to listen to God amid all the other chatter of their lives and contexts. It almost feels parallel to the effect of light pollution when we strain to see the brilliant natural lights of the night sky. We have created so much noise amongst ourselves that we've begun to drown the voice of God out.

But our readings begin to offer some correctives. First, I know no better listeners than the very young and the very old. After addressing certain practical impediments like attention span or hearing, it is at these spectrums of life that human beings often seem most attuned to the holy and most in awe of the voice of the Lord.

But what is perhaps even more remarkable about such *listening* is that it shapes not only the perception of the listener, but also the content of the speaker. Recall the last time you read a story to a toddler, or spoke with your great-grandmother. Chances are you didn't stick to a script.

The little one wants to skip a page? The story speeds up.

Grandma adds an insight? The story slows down. Perhaps, as with Sarah, you even induce a laugh? As the storyteller, you adjust.

So it is with God. Sarah laughs and the Lord responds. The mission at Colossae is “to make the word fully known” (1:25). Indeed, the whole purpose of the epistles is to clarify that word for the churches. And, although Luke doesn’t explicitly say it, the pattern suggests that Mary was not silent at Jesus’ feet as he delivered a prepared discourse, but rather, that her presence was the very thing that occasioned his teaching.

And so we are called to *listen*—to hear the word of God proclaimed *for us*. As surely as the sacraments are given *for us*, as surely as Christ died *for us*, our hope of glory, let us rejoice in this!

Amy Lindeman Allen

## Tenth Sunday after Pentecost July 24, 2016

**Genesis 18:20–32**

**Psalm 138**

**Colossians 2:6–15**

**Luke 11:1–13**

### Engaging the Texts

“See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ” (Col 2:8). In the context of the other two readings about prayer, this admonition calls to my mind the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness.

Although Jesus remains confident that God will give him anything he asks, he does not ask for the empty tokens that Satan entices him with. Even more, when hanging on the cross, Jesus does not ask that God send the angels to rescue him. Jesus’ prayer remains, “Not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

This context informs Jesus’ earlier teachings about prayer as well. In Luke 11, Jesus tells his disciples, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come” (Luke 11:2). Our prayers are not intended to be about convincing God to give us what *we* want for ourselves, but rather about living into what *God* wants for us.

Moreover, unlike Matthew’s gospel, in which Jesus’ prayer locates God the Father specifically “in heaven” (Matt 6:9), Luke’s account leaves this detail out. As a father nestled in bed with his children, God is already present with God’s children. In this way, perhaps, Jesus’ teaching emphasizes even more clearly how God the Father is present and attuned to what God’s children need.

So too, Abraham begins his negotiations with the Lord who is present with him at his tent. He engages these negotia-

tions not for his own sake, or for the sake of any individual in Sodom or Gomorrah. Instead, he pleads, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen 18:25).

This is the model of prayer that Scripture sets for us—one not based on human concerns, but rather, on discerning what is just and right in the mind of God. Prayer, then, is not to inform God of what we need—God already knows that—but to open ourselves up to a dialogue with God in which we give ourselves over to what God needs of us.

Such openness to the purpose of God is reflected well in the words of the psalmist, “The Lord will fulfill [the Lord’s] purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.” (Ps 138:8).

### Pastoral Reflections

There’s a certain irony to me that eight verses after Jesus’ disciples ask him to teach them how to pray, Jesus is telling them, “Ask, and it will be given you” (Luke 11:9). Isn’t, perhaps, the whole point of the preceding dialogue that they don’t know how or what to ask about?

Abraham similarly perplexes me with his negotiation with the Lord. He manages to bargain God all the way down from fifty righteous people to ten in order to spare Sodom and Gomorrah and he doesn’t even have to put up much of a fight. But, then, he just stops. Why didn’t he ask for five? Or just one? He was on a roll!

Maybe, as I’ve often heard, Abraham did the math—and he thought surely ten people would be enough to save the cities. But, of course, we know how that worked out. Perhaps it was all just a gross miscalculation on Abraham’s part. If so, while we can credit him for having good intentions at heart, it doesn’t seem like Abraham quite got his request right.

Similarly, I’m not convinced that the analogy in Luke about children who ask for good gifts from their parents and so receive them is as reassuring as it might seem at first glance. At least, if he had intended to reinforce a theology of gift giving, Jesus must not have met my children—who surely *would* ask for a scorpion if given the chance!

Young children, in general, often *don’t* know what’s good for them. If we let them, my one-year-old son would stick a knife in the wall outlet and my four-year-old daughter would eat nothing but candy all day long. “Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?” (Luke 11:12). Of course not! But how many of our children actually *ask* for eggs?

But rather than assuming that Jesus is radically out of touch with reality, I wonder if this isn’t his point all along? Indeed, Jesus doesn’t say, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him,” but rather, “how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13).

Now he's back to teaching again—answering the disciples' prayer by *telling* them what to ask for: the Holy Spirit. It's like telling my daughter to eat her vegetables. It may not be what she's hoping for, but it's what she needs. In the Lord's prayer, in the discourse that follows, Jesus is teaching the disciples to trust God to provide what *they need*.

Amy Lindeman Allen

## Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost July 31, 2016

**Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12–14; 2:18–23**

**Psalms 49:1–12**

**Colossians 3:1–11**

**Luke 12:13–21**

When we look at the wise, they die;  
fool and dolt perish together and leave their wealth  
to others.

—Psalm 49:10

### The riddle of wealth and work

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes may sigh resignedly, “All is vanity.” But there is a very particular vanity (“emptiness” or “illusion”) that chiefly troubles him: the human conceit that the pursuit of wealth through daily toil has any abiding purpose. As the psalmist perceived before him, our mortality means that whatever we accumulate will eventually become another's who did not toil for it.

Our lectionary snippet doesn't do justice to the Teacher of Ecclesiastes' full and more positive wisdom on the matter as in chapter three, following the lovely “Turn, Turn, Turn” hymn (3:1–8) which you might choose to sing today. Here we find the hard-won affirmation of how YHWH “has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” Rather than despair in the face of human finitude, the Teacher commends a sort of ancient existentialism that settles for knowing that “there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live” confident that “it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil” (3:11–13). The Epicurean tag-line “for tomorrow we shall die” is lacking. Instead is heard a ringing affirmation of Hebrew faith as the Teacher's concluding testimony: “I know that whatever God does endures for ever, nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it” (v. 14).

This is a sobering reflection on the daily grind, to be sure, penned by a “skeptic within the household of faith,” as one of my teachers once called Qoheleth (the Teacher). [See

Robert Davidson's *The Courage to Doubt* (London, 1983), 181.] Nonetheless, he is a Hebrew doubter in a YHWH who remains sovereign over all human quests to discern the meaning of life apart from God's word. Ecclesiastes is a much-valued resource for preaching and other pastoral work, especially in the wake of trauma and tragedy where an honest and humble word from God is needed.

We find Jesus caught in a tight pastoral situation in today's Gospel in which a voice from the crowd tries to enlist his aid in a family inheritance squabble. Rather than intervening where even angels—much less pastors—fear to tread, Jesus instead uses it as an occasion to sound a bit like the Teacher of Ecclesiastes by telling a story. For once Jesus states its point clearly at the outset: “One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15b). He then tells his story whose punch line is essentially: “You've never seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul, have you?”

Even as the bell tolls, the haunting question of Qoheleth now becomes God's question of the rich farmer who pulled down all his barns to build new and larger ones to accommodate his bumper crops: “And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” “So it is,” Jesus concludes, “with those who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God” (vv. 20–21). Which always reminds me of Jesus' words about storing up for ourselves treasures in heaven rather than on earth with the deceptive spin he puts on its conclusion, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:19, 21). We “spiritual” sorts assume that where our hearts are is where we'll invest ourselves. But Jesus knew to follow the money trail. Like someone said, “Your cancelled checks and credit card statements are the best indicators as to the state of your soul.”

I remember the feeling as a boy, when we had hauled in the last wagon-load of hay and stacked the bales in the sweltering hay mow, how we would luxuriate in the satisfaction of knowing the barn was full to the rafters with enough to see us through the long winter. I can identify with the farmer as I see him stick his thumbs behind the straps of his bib overalls and puff out his chest a bit, while sighing, “Now we can take it easy for a while, so let's kick back and enjoy.” This isn't, you see, the story of a bad man whom God decides to punish because of his evil ways. This is a story about you and me insofar as we live our daily lives without reference to God, excluding God from our everyday world of buying and selling, producing and consuming, growing and harvesting, laboring and managing whatever it is that constitutes our “livelihood.”

Colossians similarly chimes in with a reminder that the earthly Jesus who now reigns as the cosmic Christ empowers us to live a new life, seen in the light of baptismal transformation. This includes stripping off “the old self with its practices” and clothing ourselves “with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (vv. 9–10).

Relevant to our contemporary life lived amid the challenges of myriad forms of racism and sexism, homophobia and xenophobia, ethnocentrism and our own idolatrous forms of religiocentrism, it is pure gospel to hear, that “In that renewal there is no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free: but Christ is all in all” (v. 11). This is indeed music to which, as the psalmist said, “I will solve my riddle” (Ps 49:4b)—the riddle of work and wealth. “Beloved, God’s Chosen” (*ELW* #648) sings nicely the Colossians’ theme of putting on new behaviors like a baptismal garment.

*John Rollefson*

## Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost August 7, 2016

**Genesis 15:1–6**

**Psalm 33:12–22**

**Hebrews 11:1–3, 8–16**

**Luke 12:32–40**

Our innermost being waits for you, O Lord, our helper and our shield.

Surely, our heart rejoices in you, for in your holy name we put our trust.

—Psalm 33:20–21 (*ELW*)

### Faith-ing

Today’s readings conspire to take us to the heart of this matter of being church: faith. Beginning with Genesis, on through the Letter to the Hebrews and culminating in our Gospel reading from Luke, it is clear that today’s message needs to sound variations on the theme introduced by our psalmody for the day: faith, or hopeful trust, in God’s steadfast love.

It’s only fitting that we should begin with the “father of faith,” Abram, whom we find neither for the first nor the last time being assured by YHWH that he would become the forbear of a great and numerous people, as countless as the stars twinkling in a cloudless desert sky. The problem is there is no sign of the offspring needed to get the promise started toward fulfillment, and the clock is ticking. It’s not until the next chapter of Genesis that Sari will try to jump-start the seemingly stalled promise by offering her slave-girl Hagar as a surrogate. As soon will become evident, this only complicates matters and demonstrates that such human improvisation in trying to help the promise along isn’t what God has in mind.

Of relevance to today’s theme is the story’s conclusion: “And he (Abram) believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (v. 6). From Paul in Romans, chapter four, through the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* ratified by both the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation

in 1999, this passage has been key in the church’s efforts to understand the mystery of how it is that God justifies (reckons righteous) by grace through faith. [See my article “Justification in Literature: The Witness of Two Russian Masters,” in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Fall, 2012): 593–603.]

If 1 Corinthians 13 has the right to be called the “love” chapter in the New Testament, then Hebrews 11 certainly has a legitimate claim to the title of scripture’s “faith” chapter. For here the author traces faith’s genealogy back even further than Abraham to Abel, Enoch, and Noah. But Old Abe is still given pride of place in the narrative of Israel’s history of faith including the chilling allusion to how “by faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac ... his only son” (v. 17), a passage not included in today’s reading. The rhetorically repetitive use of the phrase “by faith” drums into our consciousness the author’s purpose in getting us to understand that faith is the driving force of Hebrew history, culminating in what he will name at the beginning of chapter twelve as “Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (12:2a). And so it becomes clear that this family tree of faith that has been traced so painstakingly is, in fact, the connecting thread of salvation history itself.

Mark Twain, truth-telling humorist and no friend of conventional piety, once defined faith through the mouth of his character Tom Sawyer as “believing what you know ain’t so.” The author of the Letter to the Hebrews put it a bit differently: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1), a definition drawn from his review of the history of the faithful who, “died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them” (v. 13a). This throws faith into its appropriate attitude of leaning into the future to which a promise always leads where its fulfillment is awaited in what both Paul (e.g., Rom 8:24–25) and the psalmist (33:22) call “hope.” The author’s description of the faithful as “strangers and foreigners (sojourners) on the earth ... seeking a homeland” (v. 14) is an apt description of the pilgrim character of the church. It brings us back full-circle to father Abraham whose first recorded act of faith was to respond to God’s call to “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1) in trusting obedience, “not knowing where he was going” (v. 8b), as Hebrews observes.

Today’s Gospel reading from Luke 12 collects a number of Jesus’ teachings regarding how his followers are to ready themselves for God’s impending future, that is, what living faithfully is to look like in terms of our human behavior. But Jesus begins by underlining the gift character of salvation with the encouragement, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (v. 32). Next he recommends a series of actions consistent with last week’s readings’ emphasis on not investing oneself in the pursuit of transient, earthly wealth which culminates in the assurance

that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (v. 34). And lastly, with greatly abbreviated reference to the more elaborately told end-time parable of the ten bridesmaids in Matthew 25, Jesus recommends an active and alert stance toward God’s impending future, a stance of waiting readiness, “for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (v. 40). We might call this attitude of urgent anticipation “faith-filled hope.”

A perfect hymn for the day is the short and sweet “Have No Fear Little Flock” (ELW #464). “We’ve Come This Far By Faith” (ELW #633) is also a good choice, as is “Bless Now, O God, the Journey” (ELW #326) which, in its second verse, sings of blessing “sojourners and pilgrims who share this winding way.”

John Rollefson

## Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost August 14, 2016

**Jeremiah 23:23–29**

**Psalm 82**

**Hebrews 11:29—12:2**

**Luke 12:49–56**

Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.

Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

—Psalm 82:3–4

### The marathon of faith

It’s hard to forget the occasion. Returning to my hometown parish from divinity school to preach for the first time, I took up the scroll of the prophet (today’s very reading) and proceeded to beat my assembled neighbors and family over the head with the harsh Word given the young Jeremiah to proclaim. I, too, the not-quite-reluctant-enough prophet, had been entrusted with an incendiary word (“like fire ... and a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces” [v. 29]) amid the tinderbox context of the divisive Vietnam War and simmering racial turmoil. It seemed to me that much of American religion was indeed peddling “lies ... and the deceit of their own heart” (v. 26), practicing a false prophecy that settled for telling people only what they wanted to hear.

Looking back over more than two-thirds of a life-time ago, I’m not sure that I was entirely wrong in proclaiming the prophet’s word as I did. As much as I hope I’ve matured in my pastoral sensitivities, I’m also well aware that my youthful zeal for playing the prophet has mellowed. And I’m not sure that’s a good thing. God’s Word is the same incendiary and shattering Word as then, and our American context is, if anything,

increasingly desperate for a prophetic Word amid a situation in which false prophecy is a growth industry prospering under political subsidy.

All those years ago the problem seemed to be for us in the mainline churches to challenge our congregations to relate the implications of Christian faith to social and political issues of the day. Today many in the church claim to be doing just that but in a direction that I suspect Israel’s prophets would have condemned as false prophecy. [See, as a sample, William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, 2004) and *The Collected Sermons*, Vols 1 and 2, (Louisville, 2008); Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics* (New York, 2005); Paul Wee, *American Destiny and the Calling of the Church* (Minneapolis, 2006) and Sharon Welch, *After Empire* (Minneapolis, 2004).] How to authentically proclaim the prophetic Word from the pulpit—and, more importantly, live it out in the context of our faith communities and their scattering into the world—is the difficult issue we face in today’s highly politicized and bitterly partisan context in which the religious right seems to have become the public face of so-called “organized religion” in the minds of many.

Our reading from Hebrews provides a good starting point, culminating in its vivid metaphor of the life of faith as a marathon race in which we runners enter the crowded stadium and cross the finish line to the cheers of the great “cloud of witnesses” that packs the stands. Or, to alter the image slightly, perhaps the race is more of a long-distance relay in which the baton of faith is passed from Rahab to Gideon to Barak to Samson to Jephtha to Samuel and David and the prophets, named and unnamed, male and female (vv. 31–35). Here the author of Hebrews paints for us a compelling picture of what the church will in time come to call in its creeds the “communion of saints,” that “cloud of witnesses living and dead” that have “run with perseverance the race that is set before us” all (12:1). This is an image that suggests both our personal and individual responsibility to be runners in the race of faith but in a way that emphasizes the community-of-faith-over-time’s interconnectedness and mutual support that marks “faith-ing” as a team sport.

And yet faith, as we learned last week, is essentially “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). It is not ultimately a human accomplishment but rather is the encouraging trust that arises from “looking to Jesus” as “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken the seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (12:2). To play with the race imagery a bit, this suggests that Jesus is to be seen as both the pace-setting “first leg” runner in the relay (the “pioneer”) but is also to be seen as the “perfecter” or maybe better, “completer” of the race who runs its “final leg,” the finishing runner entrusted to serve as what we sometimes call the “anchor.” Taking “his seat at the right

hand of the throne of God” takes little imagination to see as ascending the “victory stand” where the trophies are awarded, perhaps better the laurel wreath of ancient times crowning his brow rather than today’s Olympic medals.

Today’s Gospel reading pictures a Jeremiah-sounding Jesus warning of the divisiveness that his earthly mission will entail—in competitive race language, the “agony”—the “agon” to use an old Greek word that means “contest” or “struggle,” as marathoners describe “hitting the wall” when a “second wind” is needed to surmount the challenge. But Jesus, whom many vainly try to make the patron saint of conventional “family values,” here includes divisions within families as part of the cost of baptismal discipleship. Running the race of faith isn’t for sissies. It isn’t a spectator sport for couch potatoes, Jesus warns. It’s the lifelong vocation of baptism, a team sport in which we struggle together and encourage one another on to the “finish line.” “Thy Strong Word” (*ELW* #511) sings in valiant triplets of God’s incendiary Word which summons us to “Rise Up, O Saints of God” (*ELW* #699) to be ready for the crack of the starter’s pistol.

*John Rollefson*

## Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost August 21, 2016

**Isaiah 58:9b–14**

**Psalms 103:1–8**

**Hebrews 12:18–29**

**Luke 13:10–17**

### Engaging the Texts

By Chapter 13 in Luke’s gospel, Jesus has a reputation as an extraordinary healer—and as a bit of a trouble-maker (at least from the point of view of the religious authorities). His healings always seem to have an agenda, after all. The cure always means more than the cure itself, and as astounded as the crowds are, the religious leaders are wary and on guard. They’ve been charged with order, ritual, and defining faithful observance. Jesus seems to upend that whenever he comes to town.

The setting for this story of the woman healed so publicly is specific: the synagogue on the Sabbath, which might suggest that it’s not just about the healing, but about the when and where (and the who and the why!), as well. We’re only one verse into the story when Jesus sees the woman and calls her over. She does not ask for healing, nor does anyone ask on her behalf. But Jesus sees her affliction and immediately proclaims her “set free” from her ailment. When he lays his hands on her, she stands up straight and praises God.

The leader of the synagogue is apoplectic. Okay, the text says “indignant,” but you can practically see the spittle fly as

he turns to the astonished crowd and hisses, “There are six days to work, to be cured. *But NOT on the Sabbath.*” This is where the “agenda” of the story comes in.

“You hypocrites!” Jesus says, which gets everyone’s attention. Then he talks about caring for one’s animals on the Sabbath. He uses particular verbs like *untie* and *set free*, intentional language to remind the crowd and the synagogue leader (and us) that the law prohibiting work on the Sabbath comes out of the Exodus story. Therein lies its importance.

The Deuteronomy rendition of the command is very clear: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deut 5:12–15). The command is given to help ensure that bondage does not become the life-reality of *anyone*, because that is not what God is about.

So, Jesus argues, when a woman comes to this holy space on this holy day and she is in bondage to this physical affliction—of course the commandment not to work on the Sabbath is suspended in order to set her free! That is the larger intent of Sabbath-keeping—freedom from bondage of any kind.

### Pastoral Reflections

Luke’s gospel often balances a scene about a man with one about a woman (itself a statement about God’s concern for all), but Jesus’ healing of *this* woman, who is unclean due to her affliction, has heightened importance because he touches her. Jesus proclaims her healed in verse 12, but he touches her in verse 13. It is in the touching that her full freedom is restored. She stands straight and tall and is able to enter community again. She is able to praise God looking up to the heavens if she so chooses! Able to meet the eyes of her fellow worshippers! She is fully restored—set free, unbound!

This healing begins when Jesus SEES this woman (verse 12). Perhaps this act of seeing is one of the most important parts of this story. We ought to have compassion on all involved in this event—the crippled woman, of course, but also the synagogue leader. Because he’s right—there’s to be no work on the Sabbath! And the law is important in both its history and its daily function—Jesus, an observant Jew, would not have disputed that. But nuance is important, too, and Jesus reminds us that we ought not let our good laws, rules, habits, and observances hinder our vision. We need to be able to see others. We must learn to see the needs of our neighbors and work toward addressing those needs, because this is how we become God’s hands in the world. If our religious observances hinder this seeing and this important work, well—we have to take a look at how we are living our faith.

The Isaiah text that is paired with this Gospel story is also about honoring and observing Sabbath—and it speaks particularly about caring for those we may not want to see.



What kind of community are we called to be through these texts? What about our faith walk might inadvertently exclude others? What needs do we see and what are we not seeing? What hard, but good work is right in front of us in our corner of the world? How can we be God's hands and do the holy work God calls us to do?

It's interesting that this healing story is sandwiched between kingdom of God parables. The reign of God, Jesus says, is like a fruitless tree lovingly tended, like yeast in dough, like a tiny mustard seed in dirt. Could it be that this healing story has something to teach us about God's yearning for wholeness for all of creation? Might it help show us something of the pervasive and persistent nature of God's reign?

*Melanie Heuser Hill*

## Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost August 28, 2016

**Proverbs 25:6–7**

**Psalm 112**

**Hebrews 13:1–8, 15–16**

**Luke 14:1, 7–14**

### Engaging the Text

The readings for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost are counterintuitive—at least for me. They fling the world's mannerly presumptions upside down.

Proverbs begins, “The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.” While there is no consensus as to who wrote Proverbs or when, there is confidence enough to place this wisdom literature within Israel's monarchical tradition. Proverbs sets forth a prudent protocol when it says: “Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, ‘Come up here,’ than to be put lower in the presence of a noble” (Prov 25: 6–7). With this pithy saying ringing in our ears, we sense it ringing in Jesus' ears, as well, as he goes about his public ministry.

Mannerly directives are also discovered in Heb 13:1–2: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” As we preside over our holy gatherings—and our mundane Monday ones!—we are urged to keep our eyes open and our arms outstretched lest we miss the opportunity to welcome angels into our midst.

Jesus offers his own book of manners: “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay

you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14: 12–14).

There is a certain delight and disaster in Jesus' eating habits. Is it too preposterous to suggest that he is put to death for his gastronomical gatherings? Over and over again, he raises the hackles of polite and holy company and yet, in so doing, he frolics with angels—or at least with you and me.

### Pastoral Reflections

*Emily Post's Etiquette* has schooled many in proper manners. The Emily Post Institute website offers this advice: “As meals are social events, it is essential to practice proper manners . . . As with any social situation, consideration for those around you can make a world of difference to the outcome.”

Like little children who learn to keep their elbows off the table and chew with their mouths shut, God's children learn a different set of proper meal manners from the biblical narrative. This curious etiquette has a steep learning curve requiring instruction from a community schooled in grace and nurtured with love. If the company we keep on Sunday morning does not stir up some consternation among polite company, we are likely not dining with Jesus' regular eating companions.

The Orthodox Church cherishes the tradition of “holy fools.” These quirky ones, found in the literature of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, are a revered order of ministry, ranking with bishops, priests, and deacons. Kallistos Ware writes: “The fool is equivocal, enigmatic, always a disturbing question mark. . . . The frontier between breakdown and breakthrough is not clearly marked” (Bishop Kallistos Ware, “The Inner Kingdom: Volume 1 of the Collected Works,” [St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 2004], 154).

With the holy fool tradition in mind, let us not be too quick to judge the frantic screaming ones who storm into our well-scrubbed sanctuaries and threaten our neatly ordered decorum. Jesus' own foolish dining practices might crack open our hearts a bit wider.

To what book of etiquette does your congregation subscribe? While we hate to admit it, our manners tend toward those who are remarkably similar to ourselves; we are most comfortable in their presence and amid their customs. Martin Luther King Jr.'s indictment still stings, especially in our Lutheran tradition: “It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning.”

My wife has urged me to write a book on the weddings I have done. There have been elegant ones with Washington dignitaries and Olympic gold medalists. The Drifters sang “Under the Boardwalk” at one reception. The most memorable wedding, though, was with a homeless couple who asked if I would marry them. I agreed with one caveat: the ceremony should occur on our church patio on Friday morning, immediately before our weekly meal with 200 of God's blessed

hungry ones; this motley crowd was the invited wedding throng. One church member purchased the bride a lovely dress, another baked a delicious wedding cake, and my wife created a gorgeous bridal bouquet. The most surprising gift occurred as Sade and Ron processed out through the enchanted breakfast guests. The Society of Anglican and Lutheran Theologians, meeting at our church as part of the American Academy of Religion, sang “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow.” These scholars offered this impromptu gift immediately before launching into their lofty theological papers. It struck me that the most important—certainly most memorable—presentation in those days was watching the two ostracized ones brought to the center of our life together. With eyes of faith, we witnessed Proverbs, Hebrews, and Luke coming alive.

Watch any community and see how it treats the easily overlooked and you will have a pretty good hunch what its deepest theology is. You might even see angels—or Elijah—or Jesus.

*Wilk Miller*

## Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 4, 2016

**Deuteronomy 30:15–20**

**Psalms 1**

**Philemon 1–21**

**Luke 14:25–33**

God wills abundant life, reconciliation, and mutuality for our human community. Living into the future God intends for us, however, is a challenge. It requires sacrifice, and vigilance in the face of unholy forces that would sow division and discord.

In today’s reading from Deuteronomy, Moses is speaking to his fellow Israelites, a rebellious and stiff-necked people. Time and again they have turned to idols, forgetting the promises of God. Faithfulness, it turns out, is difficult and requires total commitment. Given the Israelites’ miserable track record, Moses presents the decision before them in stark, simple terms: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (v. 19). We hear a similarly direct message in Psalm 1: “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked ... but their delight is in the law of the Lord” (vv. 1–2). The long list of laws the Israelites have received are intended as a gift. Indeed, these laws are the way to choose life. Do these things, Moses seems to say, and life will be good. But don’t do these things and life will be hard. You’ll hurt yourself and wound others. You’ll provoke animosity and stir jealousy. It won’t be a happy life—for you or for the rest of your community. The natural result of unfaithfulness is unnecessary turmoil and distress. We reap the consequences of our disobedience.

Paul’s letter to Philemon makes its one and only appearance in the Revised Common Lectionary. Here the apostle appeals to Philemon to take back the escaped slave Onesimus without penalty—indeed, to receive him as a brother in Christ. The text does not reveal why Onesimus fled Philemon’s household, but it does imply that he has become a follower of Jesus during his time with Paul. The apostle pleads with Philemon to forego any punishment that might be within his right to inflict, and instead to welcome the returned slave as he would welcome Paul himself. Life in Christian community sometimes calls us to surrender what is rightfully ours for the sake of our neighbor.

A major challenge with this text, of course, is that it assumes the legitimacy of slavery. It is worth noting that biblical slavery bears little resemblance to slavery in early modern America. Slavery in biblical times was not based on race; rather, it was most often defeat in battle or economic debt that forced an individual into slavery. In any event, Paul makes no effort to critique the practice of slavery itself. As Cain Hope Felder observes, “Paul’s primary focus is not on the institution of slavery but on the power of the gospel to transform human relationships and bring about reconciliation.”<sup>2</sup> This passage from Philemon might provide an opportunity for a preacher to examine the ways even problematic texts (and the Bible has a lot of them!) can carry a word of grace. A pastor who opts not to address this text in the sermon, however, may be wise not to have it read aloud in worship at all.

Like Philemon, the text from Luke’s gospel describes the sacrifice required of those who follow the way of Jesus. Discipleship demands nothing less than all we have. It asks us to walk away from our family, our possessions, even our very lives. The examples of a tower builder and a king going to war highlight the foolishness of undertaking a major endeavor without first considering the costs; so should one who would follow Jesus consider the costs of discipleship.

The demand to “hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself” (v. 26) presents a great difficulty. The Greek word for “hate” here is *mise*, a word that is used frequently in the New Testament, including in Luke 16:13 (“No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.”). The word does not necessarily refer to anger or hostility; rather, in some cases it sets up a contrast and clarifies a choice. In the context of today’s passage, “it indicates that if there is a conflict, one’s response to the demands of discipleship must take precedence over even the most sacred of human relationships.”<sup>3</sup>

2. Cain Hope Felder, “The Letter to Philemon,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 11, eds. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 885.

3. R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 9, eds. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville:

It may not always require such a significant shift in our closest relationships, but for each of us the call to discipleship is a call to reevaluate our priorities. Moses implores us to “choose life.” How are we participating in systems that perpetuate death? How do our attitudes and behaviors devalue our neighbor or corrode our own souls? These are the questions that will shape my own preaching this Sunday.

*Javen Swanson*

## Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost September 11, 2016

**Exodus 32:7–14**

**Psalm 51:1–10**

**1 Timothy 1:12–17**

**Luke 15:1–10**

### Engaging the Texts

For many congregations this Sunday after Labor Day weekend takes on the name, “Rally Sunday,” “Come Together Sunday,” or “Welcome Back Sunday.” On this day it seems there is a declaration that summer is now over and it is time to return for the church’s fall program year. Of course, the unspoken statement is that during the summer everyone was away at the beach, down the shore, up at the cabin, or on family excursions near and far—or perhaps just too busy gardening or running a marathon or two to be at church. Whether there is truth or not in this assumption, as people come together they are hit smack-dab in the face and in the heart with text after text about sin, sinning, and sinners. What a welcome to the church and the new program year! Hopefully you are able to take another tack this year.

One suggestion is to dwell in the role and power of “agents of change.” Having a five-year-old, our family spends a lot of time with super heroes who are busy taking on the powers of this world—they are agents of change. In the texts for today we encounter Moses (a prolific agent for change) who is able to argue long and hard enough to get God to change God’s mind. We encounter the psalmist who is well aware of flaws and foibles and seeks transformation, singing to God, “Create a new and steadfast spirit within me.” Likely we hear a disciple of Paul writing on his behalf, portraying God as an agent of change who took the most broken and made him into something new. In Luke we see Jesus changing the way people look at tax collectors and sinners (breaking open religious and societal expectations) by simply telling stories of sheep and coins.

It is powerful to imagine that God can have a change of mind and heart (transformation). Could it be that, due to

this experience, God knows what is possible for people? Is it through this experience that God will not give up arguing with us, challenging us, and prodding us, because God knows that all—even the Most High—can turn around and be reminded of faithful witness and covenantal promise?

The preacher might take a communal track in addressing change for the Hebrew people, an individual track with the psalmist or Paul, or a societal or religious track with Jesus challenging systems and norms. God knows what is possible as recipient and agent of change. We encounter God who embodies transformation and, in lived witness and story, becomes an agent of change in our lives and in the world.

### Pastoral Reflections

September 11, 2016, marks the fifteenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. On many Sundays it may be significant to focus on the Exodus text and look at the idols of capitalism and militarism around which we have built our worldview. However, on this Sunday, memories of 9/11 are still raw for many people. It may be effective to explore the idols of comfort and complacency we create to hold our fears at bay. The people of Israel had moved beyond the fear of slavery and yet desired something bigger, different, more. They sought power and promise beyond the God of their ancestors.

It is powerful to examine the ways we have rebuilt our lives and world over the last fifteen years: Are we putting our trust in God? Are we creating false gods or understandings? How is fear being used to turn us from trust in the Holy One? What will it mean for us to be changed, transformed, or restored today?

The story of Paul as lifted up in 1 Timothy speaks to our being broken open and used in new ways. It is an opportunity to hear how God took someone who was on one path and turned his life in a new direction. The parables of Jesus also challenge us to see a God who is about changing the world by seeking out the ones who are lost.

Coming into this Sunday there will likely be expectations and excitement, yet the most powerful witness is of the individual (perhaps a long-time member or someone just coming through the door for the first time) who hears that God is doing a new thing in and through him or her. God calls us to abandon the lies and stories we tell ourselves, perhaps as a cultural narrative or about our own lives, and to engage in a new story—a holy conspiracy of new life for the nation, the community, the individual.

Today is a day that can set the tone for a new program year, but more importantly it is the day that can speak a word of hope into the lives of each person and a community longing to know that God seeks them out, lifts them up, and carries them home.

Abingdon, 1995), 292.

*Brad Froslee*

## Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 18, 2016

Amos 8:4–7

Psalm 113

1 Timothy 2:1–7

Luke 16:1–13

### Engaging the Texts

Amos doesn't mince words indicting those who trample on the needy. Merchants can hardly wait for the new moon festival and Sabbath to be over so they can get back to making money. Make the *ephah* small—give customers less than they paid for. Make the *shekel* large—put a heavy weight on the balance when a customer puts her money on the scale. These crooked practices extended to trading in human beings—like young girls trafficked today for sex.

In the Second Reading, the plea to pray for “kings and all who are in high positions” comes at the right season. While congregations cannot endorse particular candidates it is fitting to pray that our future leaders will be filled with wisdom and compassion. While not endorsing anyone, we pray that their leadership will enable everyone to “lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Tim 2:2).

Luke 16 is one of the most puzzling parables Jesus ever told! Is Jesus recommending slightly devious business practices? Is all wealth “dishonest wealth?” What the steward does seems totally dishonest, but it works! Is Jesus saying, “Go and do likewise?”

In his book *Parables as Subversive Speech*, William Herzog titles his chapter on this parable “A Weapon of the Weak.” He says the steward is the weak one. He's been given a position of some power, but he was very vulnerable. He was despised by the tenants under him and beholden to the landowner who was over him. Somebody—perhaps disgruntled tenants—brought anonymous charges against the steward. He doesn't refute the charges but realizes his survival is at stake. “What can I do? I'm not strong enough to dig and I'm too ashamed to beg.” So he goes to the debtors and reduces their bills! In each case the reduction was the amount of interest due on both commodities—50 percent for olive oil because it could easily turn bad and 20 percent for wheat that was more stable. Other commentators say these amounts would have been the steward's share of the profits. Even with the reductions, the landowner still got what he was owed. So everyone wins: the debtors are pleased because their bills are reduced, the landowner gets his rightful share of the produce, and the steward keeps his job! Is this how Jesus wants us to act? Whatever confusion this parable causes, Jesus' last words are quite clear: “You cannot serve God and wealth.”

### Pastoral Reflections

If the preacher chooses to preach on Amos, it won't be hard to find contemporary parallels of corruption and greed. During this campaign season we've heard a lot about the growing inequality within the United States. Condemning unnamed “crooked merchants” or the 1 percent may offer the congregation an easy escape. How about comparing the \$598 billion we spend on defense to the piddling amounts we spend on welfare or education? Aren't we all guilty of trampling on the needy and cheating those who are poor? (Ralph Klein)

Amos will keep trying to get our attention when we turn to the Gospel: “Don't forget Jesus' last words,” he says. “You cannot serve God and wealth.” Jesus is telling this parable to his disciples—not the crowd. Whenever he does this, we are standing with the disciples for we are their descendants, followers of Jesus gathered in the church. Jesus wants them—and us—to understand that how we handle earthly wealth is related to how we handle true riches, the commonwealth of God. We used to say, “You cannot serve God and *mammon*”—not just money, but property, investments, inheritance, etc. But most of the people in the sanctuary don't think they're serving wealth, and neither does the preacher.

A couple years ago I read an article in *The New York Times* about a woman named Alpha. She got off her job as a security guard at 7:00 a.m. and by noon she had to get to her second job directing traffic at Kennedy airport. That gave her a few hours to go home and sleep—except she had no home. She lived in a shelter, one of 50,000 homeless people in New York City.

Like many people in the shelters, Alpha worked two jobs. “You try, you try and you try,” she said, “and you're getting nowhere. I'm still in the shelter.” There is simply not enough affordable housing in most of our cities. Like the steward in Jesus' parable, we need to be savvy and smart, not naïve. Jesus was honest when he said, “For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” If New York City can spend \$3000/month to house a family in a shelter there must be some way to build housing that would cost less per month. The shrewd steward could surely figure that out! Many congregations have also figured it out! They have formed church-based community organizations to build or support affordable housing. Nehemiah housing in Brooklyn and the Bronx made permanent housing affordable for poor working people. Other congregations have turned parking lots into housing for seniors. Some seminaries are partnering with others to build affordable housing on campus land. We can surely pray for homeless people. But Amos and Jesus challenge us to do much more.

Barbara Lundblad

## Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 25, 2016

Amos 6:1a, 4–7

Psalm 146

1 Timothy 6:6–19

Luke 16:19–31

### Engaging the Texts

“Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory and lounge on their couches.” Amos’ words could describe the rich man in Jesus’ parable—a story that ends with two men dying, one rich and the other poor. From Hades, the rich man begs the poor man for water to cool his tongue. But Abraham, cradling Lazarus in his bosom, says it’s impossible because “a great chasm has been fixed” between them. That chasm was already there while the two men were alive. Jesus paints a clear picture of the separation:

a rich man dressed in purple and fine linen	<i>a poor man covered—not with fine linen—but with sores</i>
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a rich man who feasted sumptuously	<i>a poor man who longed for crumbs from the rich man’s table</i>
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Why was there such a great chasm while the rich man and Lazarus were alive? We might quickly answer that the rich man was hard-hearted and selfish. Yet, Jesus portrays him as a man with great compassion, begging Abraham to warn his five brothers so they won’t end up in this place of torment. But Abraham replies, “They have Moses and the prophets, they should listen to them.” The rich man could have believed that he had listened! His interpretation may have caused the chasm between himself and Lazarus. It’s possible that certain interpretations of scripture widen the chasm in our own time.

Jesus is interpreting scripture with this parable. How do we rightly understand Moses and the prophets? “Just read the Bible!” But it’s not so simple. In Deuteronomy 28 we read: “If you will obey the Lord your God ... these blessings shall come upon you.” The verses that follow describe blessings in city and field, fruits of the ground, increase in cattle and flocks—a glorious prosperity gospel! The rest of the chapter is filled with curses for those who do not obey God’s law. These curses are direct reversals of the blessings—devastation and destruction, blight and mildew, pestilence and plague. And this particular curse: “The Lord will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head” (Deut 28:35).

“And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores...even the dogs would come and lick his sores.”

Jesus calls attention to the sores—Lazarus looks exactly like the one cursed by God. Thus, according to one interpretation of Moses and the prophets, the great chasm was Lazarus’ fault. He must have disobeyed God. The rich man doesn’t have to do anything for the man lying at his gate.

But Jesus challenges this interpretation. He knew there were other words in scripture. In this same book of Deuteronomy, God tells the people: “You shall open wide your hand to your brothers and sisters, to the needy and to the poor” (Deut 15:7–11). This was not a weak voice, but one that was steady and strong. This voice grew even stronger in the writings of the prophets such as Amos, Jeremiah, and Isaiah. For the prophets and Jesus, poverty is not a sign of disobedience and wealth is not proof of faithfulness. It was poor, hungry Lazarus—not the wealthy man—who was embraced in the bosom of Abraham.

### Pastoral Reflections

Jesus didn’t tell this parable to scare the hell out of us. Jesus told this parable to change the way we live here and now. We’re feasting and Lazarus is still hungry. Of course, there isn’t only one man named Lazarus. There are millions of hungry men, women, and children outside our gates and beyond our borders. There is a great chasm between us and people who are starving.

Jesus didn’t tell us exactly how to close the chasm, but he surely thought there shouldn’t be one. What could have changed the rich man? What will change us? We need to be converted. We are a very generous country when measured by total dollars given in aid. But the percentage of our giving compared with our wealth is very tiny—two tenths of a percent of our Gross National Income. This means we are 20<sup>th</sup> out of 22 developed countries.<sup>4</sup>

We can do better as a country. I can do better as an individual. Those of us who are Christians have no choice if we listen to Jesus: we’re called to see Lazarus and feed him. There is something each one of us can do to work toward that day when no person goes to bed hungry. Jesus knew long ago what economists and hunger advocates are telling us now: we have everything we need to end world hunger. It would take an additional \$13 billion per year—2.2 percent of our defense budget.<sup>5</sup>

Nothing will change us without conversion. We can even read the Bible and not be changed. We can find verses that proclaim wealth as God’s blessing and poverty as God’s curse. But the prophets had a radically different vision. So did Jesus. Do we need more statistics? more courage? more time to volunteer? Perhaps most of all we need more faith. Jesus’ parable ends with these ironic words: “Abraham said to the rich man,

4. *U.S. Contributions to Reducing Global Poverty: An Assessment of the U.S. and the Millennium Development Goals*, 59.

5. Office of Management and Budget: [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/rewrite/budget/fy2008/defense](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/rewrite/budget/fy2008/defense) The defense budget for 2008 was \$623.1 billion, not including care for veterans of current wars.

‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Someone *has* risen from the dead. What more do we need? The risen Jesus is calling us to give Lazarus something to eat.

*Barbara Lundblad*

## Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost October 2, 2016

**Habakkuk 1:1–4; 2:1–4**

**Psalms 37:1–9**

**2 Timothy 1:1–14**

**Luke 17:5–10**

### Engaging the Texts

We know very little about Habakkuk except that he seems to have a non-Hebrew name. From the plaintive cries of the first verses we sense disaster and danger, perhaps the time of the first deportation to Babylon. This is the only time Habakkuk appears in the lectionary but the last words of this reading have had an oversized impact in scripture and theology: “but the righteous live by their faith.” That phrase is picked up by Paul (Rom 1:17, Gal 3:11), the author of Hebrews (Heb 10:38–39) and by Luther in his insistence on justification by faith alone. For Habakkuk, faith wasn’t over against the law but very much a matter of faithfulness to Torah. Can you see the prophet standing on the ramparts? “Write the vision,” God tells him. “Make it plain on tablets so that a runner may read it.” How big would the writing have to be so someone running past could read it?

Today and the next three Sundays, the Second Reading is from 2 Timothy. Evidence is strong that this letter was written in Paul’s name, long after his death. Matthew Skinner encourages preachers not to dwell on authorial authenticity: “I don’t think sermons on Second Timothy should belabor the authorship question; they can legitimately dwell within the literary fiction the letter stages, as a suffering ‘Paul’ gives his last lecture to his beloved pupil.” (*Working Preacher, October 6, 2013*) There is a sense of intimacy in this letter as well as urgency to remain faithful. Two women are named among the faithful: Timothy’s grandmother Lois and his mother, Eunice. The words addressed to Timothy could also be for them: “for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

The theme of faith is also central to the gospel reading: “Increase our faith!” the apostles plead. Note that the “disciples” at the beginning of this chapter are now called “apostles.” This shift in language hints that Luke wants readers to see the apostles as leaders of the movement that will continue after Jesus is no longer with them. Jesus isn’t chiding the apostles by saying, “If you had faith.” The *if* is not negative, but a “condition ac-

ording to fact,” which assumes that they do have such faith.” (Sharon Ringe, *Luke*, 219) In essence Jesus is saying, “You may feel your faith is puny, but I’m telling you it is enough to carry out my mission.” There seems little connection between the longing for more faith and Jesus’ call to be slaves. The slave metaphor is difficult and can easily eclipse the last line: “we have done only what we ought to have done!” Jesus may be warning these apostles not to get too enthralled with their position as leaders. This was a tough lesson. At the last supper, they’ll be arguing about who is greatest and Jesus will remind them that the leader must be like the one who serves (Luke 22:24–27). In the context of U.S. history, being a servant sounds different than being a slave.

### Pastoral Reflections

Each of these texts offers rich possibilities—give yourself permission to choose just one! With Election Day a month away the First Reading is compelling. “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?” One thing this campaign has done is to uncover pain that had gone unnoticed and neglected. What cries do you hear in the congregation you serve? But there isn’t only a cry; there is also a vision. Write it in big letters so big a runner can read it without stopping! Invite people to send an email or post on the congregational Facebook page: What vision is God calling us to write in our time?

Or you may choose to preach on 2 Timothy, especially Lois and Eunice. They raised this young man to have faith in Jesus. Most women in the New Testament are identified only with adjectives—crippled, Syrophenician, sinful. Somebody remembered Lois and Eunice by name. Whose names do you remember? Who passed on the faith to you? This can be a pastoral affirmation of parents and grandparents, Sunday School teachers, and adult friends who share their faith with children and youth. Perhaps this is a day to share the pulpit with people who tell stories of someone who passed on the faith to them.

A sermon on Luke 17 calls for some teaching—especially about Jesus’ metaphor of the slave. Even if slavery in the first century was not as harsh as slavery in U.S. history, it did mean owner and owned. We cannot hear that metaphor without seeing tragic pictures of African American slaves punished for failing to work hard enough in the fields and flogged for being uppity toward their masters. “One must consider carefully whether such a social metaphor is appropriate for the lifestyle that bears a gospel of ‘good news to the poor.’” (Ringe, 219) At the last supper Jesus tells his disciples, “I am among you as one who serves.” Jesus *chose* to be a servant. No one brought to America in chains chose to be a slave.

*Barbara Lundblad*