Preaching Helps

The Sundays of Ordinary Time
July–September 2023

Generational Trauma. Generational Resilience.

This issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* focuses on trauma experienced by individuals, communities, countries, and the earth itself. Dr. Kimberly Wagner, editor for this issue, has written a book that is especially helpful to preachers: *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma.* As she notes in the introduction to this issue, "…trauma not only steals language but also seeks to silence the community's meaning makers…Trauma threatens to throw into question all that we have known to be true and the ways we have normally navigated the world."[1]

I thought of Dr. Wagner's words when I visited the Heard Museum in Phoenix this May. The museum is filled with exquisite Native American art, both past and present: intricately patterned baskets, weavings, paintings, sculptures, and glass blowing. A large area on the second floor is dedicated to the role of Indian Boarding Schools in the United States. In many ways, these schools shared a common goal: to "steal language" and to "silence a community's meaning makers." Hundreds of these schools were operated by the federal government, others by Christian denominations. The U.S. government operated these schools from 1879 to the present. Children were removed from their families, often by force, and taken miles away to boarding schools. When children arrived at the school, their home clothing and moccasins were discarded and replaced by military uniforms or Victorian dresses and lace-up shoes. The photos taken upon entry and after being "Americanized" were startling and tragic. One Inuit family arrived wearing their traditional clothing made of animal skins, with parka-like hoods. In the next picture they are sitting still as statues, the women are dressed in purple Victorian dresses, the father in a black suit. Students were given "American" names and forbidden to speak their native languages. In 1898 a compulsory attendance law empowered the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to withhold food, clothing, and annuities from families who refused to send their children.

Richard H. Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, extolled the practice of the "outing system" in which Indian children were placed with non-Indian families:

> I say that if we take a dozen young Indians and place each one in an American family, taking those so young they have not learned to talk, and train them up as children of those families, I defy you to find any Indian in them when they are grown. I believe if we took one of those Indians—a little papoose from his mother's back, always looking backward —into our families, face it the other way and keep it under our care and training until grown, it would then be Anglo-Saxon in spirit and American in all its qualities. Color amounts to nothing. The fact that they are born Indians does not amount to anything.
>
> (A speech to the Board of Indian Commissioners, 1889)

Christianity was a continuing objective of these schools, whether run by the government or Christian denominations. Children were expected to kneel by their beds to recite evening prayers and were required to attended Sunday worship. Customs that had been very important to Native people were forbidden. No more puberty ceremonies to mark the transition of a young girl to womanhood or a boy's passage into being a man. These ceremonies were significant markers in the life of Native communities. The puberty ceremony for girls often extended over four days and was a true celebration. There was no shame in these communities as there has often been in white Americanized communities where menstruation has often been hidden or disparaged.

The trauma of forced separation was communal as well as individual. Juanita Blues Spencer remembers when she was taken away to the Santa Fe Indian School in 1915: "I remember it was in October they came to get me. My mother started to cry. 'Her? She's just a little girl. You can't take her.' My mother put her best shawl on me." There is no record of whether that special shawl was taken away from Juanita, but it is a priceless metaphor of the love that accompanied each child who was sent away from family and all that was familiar.

Though it seems far too late, many churches are now exploring their own denomination's role in these boarding schools. Though some political forces refuse to allow teaching or talking about anything negative in U.S. history, churches can insist on seeking the truth about Indian Boarding Schools. We can affirm renaming places to honor Native American people even when it seems awkward—as when Lake Calhoun (named for John Calhoun, a slave-owner) was changed to *Bde Maka Ska* (Dakota name meaning Lake White Earth). After a bit of practice, Minnesotans can pronounce the new name

1. Kimberly Wagner, *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 5-6.

and remember those who settled near the lake long ago. Land acknowledgements, spoken and written, have also become one tangible way of remembering Native American people who lived on the land where our churches, schools, farms, businesses, and homes now stand. These efforts are small beginnings. Hopefully we will be more diligent in honoring the people who lived here long before we arrived; we will refuse to "steal language" or "silence the community's meaning makers."

Years ago, I saw a stunning exhibit of art by Native American women at the Minneapolis Art Institute. Along with the artwork there were video clips featuring the words of several of the artists. One of those artists talked about the reality of generational trauma that was expressed in many of the art pieces. I cannot remember her exact words, but she acknowledged the tragedies of generational trauma: removal from homelands (more than once), the Trail of Tears (more than one), broken treaties (too many to count), children forced from home to go to boarding schools far away (nobody knows how many). Even those who never experienced these tragedies in their own lives continue to experience trauma passed down through generations. "But," she said, "there is also *generational resilience*. It does not diminish or disregard generational trauma, but it is also passed down from mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Generational resilience is also here on these walls and in our lives." How do we acknowledge generational trauma as well as generational resilience in our preaching?

As we move through this long, green season of Ordinary Time, I am grateful to the writers who bring their insights on the texts for this season. **Patrick Cabello Hansel** is a retired ELCA pastor who served for thirty-five years in urban, bilingual congregations in the Bronx, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis. His poetry collections are *The Devouring Land* (Main Street Rag Publishing), *Quitting Time* (Atmosphere Press), and the forthcoming *Breathing in Minneapolis* (Finishing Line Press), which deals with the challenges Minneapolis has faced in the past three years. He has published poems and prose in over eighty-five journals and won awards from the Loft Literary Center and Minnesota State Arts Board. He is currently working on a novel, as well as serializing his second novella in a local newspaper. His website is: www.artecabellohansel.com. **Samantha Gilmore** is the Assistant Professor of Homiletics at Wartburg Theological Seminary. She holds a PhD in Practical Theology (Homiletics) focusing on Speech Communication in Ministry from Princeton Theological Seminary. On April 28, 2010, Samantha was baptized at Trinity Lutheran College after hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed. She is overjoyed to be a part of this foolish means through which God freely gives people the gospel and transforms lives. For twenty-three years, **Jeff R. Johnson** has served the neighborhood-engaged, academically accomplished, and progressively inclined University Lutheran Chapel, located in the Southside neighborhood of the University of California at Berkeley. Jeff also serves as part of the Spiritual Care Team on the campus at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and lives with his husband in Oakland, California. **Stan Olson** has found great joy in his vocations as husband, father, grandfather, pastor, teacher, administrator, and gardener. He explored several aspects of the pastoral vocation—serving congregations in Duluth and New Ulm, Minnesota; teaching New Testament at Luther Seminary; serving as bishop of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod of the ELCA; and leading ELCA work with ministry, education, youth, and young adults. He was president of Wartburg Theological Seminary when he retired in 2015, later served as interim president of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, and now fully retired, has tried a new role—congregation president at Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis

Ingrid Rasmussen serves as lead pastor at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in the Longfellow neighborhood of Minneapolis. She is committed to the work of compassion and believes the church is called to pursue justice in the public square. Ingrid lives in Minneapolis with her husband, Paul, and together they run to keep up with their two sweet and lively children. **John Rollefson** is a retired ELCA pastor who has served urban and campus ministries in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, and Los Angeles, plus interims in Solvang and London. He is the author of *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary.* John and his wife, Ruth, live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church. **Lori Ruge-Jones** loves accompanying young adults on their journey through life and faith in her role as campus pastor in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. She is a biblical storyteller, and delights in seeing her adult children thrive. **Phil Ruge-Jones** is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and is also a biblical storyteller. He serves as the director of the Lay School of Ministry for the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. **Sarah Trone Garriott** serves as Coordinator of Interfaith Engagement for the Des Moines Area Religious Council Food Pantry Network. She regularly preaches and presides at Christian congregations throughout Iowa. Each summer she coordinates a camp for high school youth and incoming Drake University students to explore the diverse religious communities of the Des Moines Metro and create digital storytelling projects about their own faith (see www.iowainterfaithexchange.com for more about the camp). In 2020 she was elected to the Iowa State Senate for District 22 (Windsor Heights, Clive, Waukee, and parts of West Des Moines). During the daily prayer in the Senate Chamber, she shared prayers written by Iowans from the Muslim, Jewish, and Sikh communities.

If you forget how important your preaching is for the people who come to worship, take this reminder from Mary Oliver. She is talking about *poems* but I've substituted the word "sermons":

> For [sermons] are not words after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry. Yes, indeed.[2]

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, Preaching Helps

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
July 2, 2023

Jeremiah 28:5–9
Psalm 89:1–4, 15–18
Romans 6:12–23
Matthew 10:40–42

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

Our Gospel passage begins by pointing to the close relationship Christians are offered with Jesus, and through Jesus, with God (Matt 10:40). Jesus' close presence with his disciples is such that those who welcome his disciples welcome him. Furthermore, Jesus' relationship of unity with his Father is so intimate that Jesus' presence cannot be separated from the presence of the Father. Through the forgiving, righteous-making, reconciling event of Jesus' death and by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians are given access to Trinitarian communion. This communion does not collapse God and humanity or flatten the relationship between Jesus as Lord and Christians as his servants (cf. Rom 6:12-23). It does, however, reveal the depth of divine love for humanity poured out in Jesus' death to make this relationship possible.

"Prophet," "righteous person," and "little one" (Matt 10:41-42) can refer to distinct groups of people or different aspects of discipleship. A "prophet" proclaims what God has done, is doing, and will do to make all things new in Christ Jesus. They use their voice to "declare that [God's] steadfast love is established forever" (Ps 89:2) with radical consequences for how we are called to live now through the transforming power of the gospel. A "righteous person" seeks to live out the implications of the gospel as a transformed person who has "been brought from death to life" (Rom 6:13), embodying the values of the kingdom of heaven in everything they do. "Little one" refers particularly to members of marginalized groups, whether due to age, class, ability, line of work, etc. "Little one" also, however, points to the inherent vulnerability of being a disciple of Jesus Christ in a world that does not want to hear that it needs saving from sin and death. Earlier in the same chapter, Jesus warns his disciples that they will "be hated by all because of [Jesus'] name" (Matt 10:22), that "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death" (Matt 10:21). Everyone who follows Jesus is at risk and is thus a "little one."

However, everyone who follows Jesus also gets equally rewarded. While the kingdoms of this world only reward some and reward some more than others (the brave preacher might speak more specifically about this near Independence Day), Jesus is not interested in limiting the number of rewards or ranking them. The reward is free for all who are given faith to believe the gospel proclaimed by Jesus' disciples. "Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward" (Matt 10:41). That is, anyone who offers a prophet the hospitality fitting for who they are as one who brings the good news of the gospel will receive the same reward as the prophet. The same is said about the one who "welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person" (Matt 10:41). The identity of the welcomer does not matter. The one who offers a righteous person the hospitality fitting for who they are as one living out the implications of the gospel receives the same reward. The final example reinforces this equality of reward regardless of worldly status. This time, the welcomer welcomes by offering a simple "cup of cold water," and the guest is described as a "little one" (Matt 10:42). Neither the water nor the guest is impressive by worldly standards. Still, the welcomer recognizes the little one as a disciple, that is, as one who follows Jesus, and offers them the hospitality fitting for who they are according to what they have to give. Each receives the same reward.

As for the content of this reward, it seems unhelpful to speculate beyond salvation, through which we already receive forgiveness of sin, righteousness before God, and eternal life with God that begins now. People often think of God as far away and the gospel as something that makes a difference solely in the future. But the presence of God in Jesus Christ is with us now by the power of the Holy Spirit, not in general but personally, in every human interaction. Those human interactions can sometimes feel like an inconvenience interfering with our personal projects. I sometimes find myself hardly present even with the person speaking to me, having already raced ahead to the next thing in my mind, let alone present with Jesus in our midst. The preacher might reflect on how our interactions can be transformed when we

2. Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook* (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 122.

become more aware of welcoming Jesus when we welcome others. Our hospitality, patience, compassion, and willingness to help may improve considerably. Our priorities may find themselves more humanely ordered. We may see the many ways in which God is at work now, giving us grace to forgive as we have been forgiven and bringing reconciliation to our relationships for the sake of new and abundant life for us.

Finally, most of us don't live in places where people are described as prophets, righteous people, and little ones. The preacher can show their listeners analogous people in their neighborhood today so that this passage can more easily hold up a mirror and speak to their lives. The listeners can also be shown how they can be these people to one another, reminding one another what the gospel is and what difference it makes with a simple glass of water. This can sometimes become implied for those of us who have been Christians for a long time. But we are a forgetful people, in need of reminding again and again.

Samantha Gilmore

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 9, 2023

Zechariah 9:9–12
Psalm 145:8–14
Romans 7:15–25a
Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

"This generation" (Matt 11:16), which might include anyone who has seen the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus and failed to respond, is said to be like children arguing whether to play wedding or funeral (Matt 11:17). This comparison might be understood in two ways. First, John the Baptist and Jesus have not been who the crowds want them to be and have not done what the crowds want them to do. John the Baptist "came neither eating nor drinking," behaving strangely and ascetically to such an extreme that the crowds accused him of having "a demon" (Matt 11:18). Jesus, meanwhile, has gone too far in the other direction, "eating and drinking" with precisely the wrong people, the kind of people whom no respectable Messiah should be caught associating with at all, let alone sharing a meal with (Matt 11:19). The crowds want to set the agenda, acting as gods over the ones who have come to prepare the way and to save them. When John the Baptist and Jesus do not comply, the crowds complain like children, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn" (Matt 11:17). Connections can be made to the ways we seek to set Jesus' agenda for him. Or, we follow our own agenda (or our political party's agenda) and assume it is also Jesus', with the result that we do not hear and follow Jesus because we assume we already know where he is going and how to get there. The gospel we proclaim when these things happen can quickly become a message that does not lead to Jesus dying on the cross for us. For who would choose such an agenda for their Messiah?

A second way we might understand the comparison of "this generation" to arguing children is as one group of Jesus' followers complaining to another that they are following Jesus incorrectly (cf. 1 Cor 1:11–12). Each side is busy self-righteously pointing fingers at the other who is failing to "dance" and "mourn" at the proper cue. The result is that neither of them is listening or pointing others to Jesus. Connections can be made to the ways we become distracted by pointing out what we perceive to be the flaws of other Christians to the extent that we spend more time pointing to those things, and perhaps our own perceived righteousness, than we do pointing to Jesus himself. The gospel we proclaim can become a message in which we identify more as one doing the saving than we do as sinners who need saving, thus removing the centrality of Jesus. Yet, "wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (Matt 11:19b). Jesus' deeds (Jesus is identifying as "Wisdom" here, a distinctly feminine figure in Scripture, which may be of interest to those exploring expansive language) reveal who he is and will bring him back to the center when our own salvific efforts inevitably fail.

Those of us who preach and have acquired some theological education might spend additional time dwelling prayerfully in the second half of our Gospel passage. Our status as those with some power and privilege (we speak of God while others listen) suggests a predisposition toward the tendencies of "the wise and the intelligent" from whom certain things have been hidden (Matt 11:25). We may trust in our own worldly wisdom and authority, doing things on our own as though we do not need Jesus even though this is the very thing we do not want to do as preachers (cf. Rom 7:15–25a). Our status as ministers of the gospel in the twenty-first century United States also suggests a predisposition toward weariness and "carrying heavy burdens," such that we are in deep need of "rest for [our] souls" (Matt 11:28–29).

Matthew's Jesus invites us to learn from "infants" (Matt 11:25). In the first half of our passage, children are spoken of in a negative sense. Here, however, we see that the youngest ones are those to whom the Father reveals the things that are hidden from "the wise and the intelligent." Infants have not yet internalized the lie told in the United States that needing help is something to be ashamed of, to hide at all costs. They freely cry out for help; they know they need it and are happy

to receive it. Infants have also not yet internalized the lie told in the United States that their worth is connected to their work and productivity. They gratefully rest their souls when given the opportunity.

The preacher can happily proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, which declares out in the open that human beings are fundamentally in need of a Savior. Our inability to "do the good [we] want" (Rom 7:19) keeps us as helpless as infants. We do not outgrow this; we do not need to hide this by overcompensating with extra production. Instead, we can turn openly to the Lord, who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made" (Ps 145:8–9). Lest we be left on our own, Jesus offers us his yoke, a device made for two. He remains in the other side of the yoke. With his yoke upon us, we not only "learn from [him]," who is the wisdom of God, as we inevitably move where he leads, but we "find rest for [our] souls" (Matt 11:29). The preacher can let the yoke reflect the cross of Christ as the yoke upon which Jesus bears the unbearable weight of our sin for us and promises us rest in him. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom 7:25).

Samantha Gilmore

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 16, 2023

Isaiah 55:10–13
Psalm 65: [1–8], 9–13
Romans 8:1–11
Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

Engaging the Texts

Isaiah 55 is a hymn of joy, using metaphors of abundant food and drink available to all. These verses focus on dependable moisture that produces the abundance. The prophet uses this image of dependability to speak of the sure efficacy of God's word.

Psalm 65 is a hymn of thankful joy for God's dependable, nurturing love. The imagery portrays abundant rainfall, abundant crops, abundant flocks. The abundance is itself seen as praise of God (v.13c).

In **Romans 8:1–11,** Paul continues his explorations of complex concepts of faith—law, freedom, spirit, flesh, body, and more. He uses these reflections to express and explore believing confidence, offering assurance, "You are not in the flesh! You are in the Spirit!" (v. 9). This confidence is grounded in the resurrection. The God who raised Jesus from death gives us the Spirit, inspires us, gives us life.

Matthew 13 begins with a story usually called the "Parable of the Sower," but a better name might be "Parable of the Fruitful Seed." In the three chapters preceding this one, we read about disappointing responses to Jesus. He spoke to the crowds, but many rejected his words and the word about him. In chapter 13, Matthew has begun to gather accounts that focus more on those who have responded positively. Here Jesus' followers are the audience—or, thinking of Matthew's time and ours, the church is the audience. The parable in vv. 1–9 drives toward confidence—the fruitful seed produces a wonderful harvest.

Anytime the lectionary omits a portion of a text, as it here omits vv. 10–17, we have reason for curiosity and for caution. Why is it omitted? Only for brevity? Is the meaning changed thereby? Today's lectionary reading moves directly from the confident parable (vv. 1–9) to the much more tense allegorized account usually called its explanation (vv.18–23). Matthew, however, separated those two texts. He appears to have seen the parable and the interpretation as complementary, but with different messages, different nuances. In the first, the focus is on abundant harvest. In the second, the focus shifts to the problems the word encounters—the soils, the varying responses. The omitted verses serve to separate the two accounts but also to provide a transition. This section assures the readers that they (we) have the capacity to understand the message, hidden though it is for others. The transition heightens the realism about unbelief and failure to bear fruit, even within the church. Yet the transition and the allegory are not finally negative. Here too is a reminder of good soil and abundant harvest (v. 23).

Pastoral Reflections

I suggest you explore the intricacies of these wonderful texts from the foundation of the texts' common expression of trust in our dependable God and their common intent to undergird such confident trust.

We speak and listen within the great community of faith. I might begin by quoting Isaiah 55:10–11, a segment of the Psalm, or Romans 8:9, as a way set the tone of confidence in the efficacy of God's word. A hymn before the sermon, and then reference to it, could do the same. (For example, ELW 519, "Open Your Ears, O Faithful People".)

Throughout I would try to nourish confidence by using language strong enough to recognize both complex human experience and God's transformative work in that experience. Those who wrote and sang the hymns preserved in Psalm 65 and Isaiah 55 almost certainly lived close to the land, as did Jesus and those who first heard and shared his parables. Even the experience of those who lived in the small cities of the day would not have been far removed from the realities of agri-

culture. Rain, soils, risks, harvests, and herds of animals were tied to their livelihoods directly or nearly so. For these people, the metaphors were not casual or romanticized mentions of the earth's abundance. Rather, the language is strong because these texts portray things that were central to their well-being.

Wherever your setting lies on the spectrum from rural and agricultural to urban and industrial, be careful not to trivialize the message of these texts by passing lightly over the agricultural images or by translating them to your present context with some light analogy that does not evoke what is essential to livelihood. Remember also that those who did and do live close to food production and distribution are not naïve about rains that don't come or crops that fail or distribution networks that go awry. Theirs is hard won confidence, tested by difficult experiences. Our preaching is hope-filled, but it dare not be naïve about the challenges to Jesus' word. Simplistic images could diminish the message of God's dependability.

Like almost all of the New Testament, these texts were written for believers, "insiders." Alongside the theme of persistent confidence which we celebrate, the parable and the Romans text help believers remember that their faith, too, faces challenges and risks.

How will you preach to nurture confidence while also acknowledging problems such as the divisiveness and risks of our time, including deep divisions among Christians and in the wider community of faith? For the reflective hearer, such diversity may be a "soil problem" that undermines confidence.

How does our culture's common "us and them" imagery make more challenging our mission of sharing the word with our children and youth, our neighbors, one another? We are confident the seed will bring a great harvest. How do we nurture realistic, humble confidence? Tell a few strong stories of challenge and harvest.

You might use the hymn "Lord, Let My Heart Be Good Soil" (ELW 512) as an expression of humble trust. "On What Has Now Been Sown" (ELW 550) at the conclusion of worship could be a reminder that God nurtures our trust.

Stan Olson

[Given the fact that the lectionary provides so few opportunities to celebrate women, worship leaders are encouraged to remember Mary Magdalene on Sunday, July 23, 2023.]

Mary Magdalene, Apostle
July 22, 2023

Ruth 1:6–18
Psalm 73:23–28
Acts 13:26–33a
John 20:1–2, 11–18

Engaging the Texts

As soon as one opens the book of Ruth, they know it is a tale of tragedy. There is famine in the land, and scarcity is causing people to scatter. Included in the forced migration are Naomi and her husband, Elimelek, and their two sons. Their journey takes them from Judah to Moab, where Elimelek soon dies, and Naomi's sons find partners named Orpah and Ruth. Ten years into exile, Naomi's sons also die, leaving three widows to discern their future together.

Naomi hears the situation is improving back in Judah, so she makes plans to return home. She asks her daughters-in-law to let her go alone and begs them to remain and build new lives in Moab, the land of their birth. Like many farewell scenes, this exchange is filled with emotions. Orpah gives her mother-in-law a tearful goodbye kiss and exits stage right. Ruth, on the other hand, doesn't let Naomi go. The text says that Ruth clings (*dabaq*, 1:14) to Naomi. The sheer physicality of their embrace implies deep loyalty and suggests that the two are inseparable.

The image of "clinging" also appears in the pericope from John's Gospel. Preachers are well-served to remember that in all four Gospels, women are the first to arrive at the Easter tomb. Mary Magdalene is one of these women in all four Gospel accounts. Here, John's telling provides us with a close-up of Mary Magdalene, a disciple who appears only twice—first at the foot of the cross with other female-identifying disciples and, secondly, in this chaotic, daybreak scene. After finding the grave empty and sprinting to find help, Mary Magdalene returns to the cemetery and in an almost comedic interchange mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Jesus, no doubt worn out from resurrection, reorients Mary Magdalene and instructs her not to hold (*hapto*, 20:17) on to him. The verb used here points to both relational and physical proximity.

Pastoral Reflections

When it comes to holding, many of us are out of practice.

Sometime during the depths of the pandemic, I remember seeing images from hospitals around the world. Thin sheets of plastic were stretched tight across doorframes that allowed those in COVID units to come "face-to-face" with their family members or friends, without risk of transmitting the virus. The innovation was also designed with four sleeves into which the patient and their visitor could slide their arms. As cameras rolled, loved ones would cling to each other at what became known as the "cuddle curtain." Nurses said that it was fundamental for the healing process for patients to hold their beloveds.[3]

Ruth and Mary Magdalene seem to understand the connection between healing and holding. Ruth implores her mother-in-law, Naomi, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried" (Ruth 1:16-17*).* Mary Magdalene proclaims a similar sentiment on Easter morning, saying, "Tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away" (John 20:15).

These are visions of Immanuel. Women understand and embody a God who acts not as a vaguely aware bystander, but as a mother ready to swaddle her child for the sake of the world's healing. We cannot help but hear echoes of Jesus' birth narrative and remember that even before Jesus can hold, he is held—wrapped up in linen love by his mama. Throughout the biblical narrative, women cling tightly to each other and to those they love.

This post-COVID world is aching to be held by something or someone with arms big enough to hold the depth of our individual and collective experiences, many of which we cannot yet articulate. The Feast of Mary Magdalene gives us the opportunity to wrap our community in the promise that, in the end, the incarnation is not something that we comprehend; it's something we experience. It's daughters who journey with mothers. It's arms that find their way through plastic curtains. It's a loyal friend who shows up at the grave with tears in their eyes. Maybe Jesus tells Mary Magdalene not to cling to him because he trusts that God will indeed hold the world, no matter what lies ahead.

Ingrid Rasmussen

3. Cuddle curtain video (https://youtu.be/fB5-d9LwaBU).

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 23, 2023

Isaiah 44:6–8
Psalm 86:11–17
Romans 8:12–25
Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

Engaging the Texts

Isaiah 44:6–8: The exclusivity of God's claim calls for faithfulness and caution. For the interpreter, it is the foundation that undergirds all confidence.

Psalm 86:11–17: In harmony with the exclusive claim recorded in Isaiah, the psalmist prayed for an undivided heart to reflect God's steadfast love. The assumption and premise behind our confidence and our prayers is that God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger. This confession of faith determines the nature of our patience in the face of challenges.

Romans 8:12–25 continues the prior week's assigned reading and the themes of flesh and spirit, living in the tension. Notice how this section is realistic about suffering but persistently points forward with confidence. Paul's language again and again directs the reader to what God will yet do: "you will live," you are "heirs" with inheritance ahead of you, "we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him," "the glory about to be revealed," "creation waiting for the revealing of the children of God," "labor pains," "first fruits," "groan inwardly while we wait," "waiting," "hope." It's all about God's good future. The forward-looking invitation is summed up in the image of "patience" which is possible for believers because they know the promise.

Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43: As in the lectionary for the prior week, this gospel text omits a section, occasioning our curiosity and caution. Why? Does the omission matter? I think so. The parable itself (vv. 24–30) conveys growth and nurtures confidence despite the weeds. The omitted section includes two short parables of amazing growth and a comment about why Jesus used parables. The omitted parables reinforce the message of confidence in God's surprising abundance. The note on parabolic language (vv. 34–35) makes clear that Matthew saw all these parables as spoken to and intelligible to insiders (the church). Believers will grasp the message which "proclaim(s) what has been hidden from the foundation of the world." The allegorized parable explanation (vv. 36–41), however, puts much more emphasis on the last judgment and division than on confidence in the word.

Some commentaries give us theories about the nature of the weeds and why it might have been difficult to distinguish young weeds from young wheat. That may be interesting, but it's likely a distraction from the story's emphasis on the risk of

uprooting the grain. The householder urges caution for the sake of the promised harvest. Were there some in Matthew's community who were too zealously seeking a "pure" church?

The allegorical interpretation is offered in a house, not in public. The message is for the church, for those who are grasped by God's abundant promise. The sharpened focus on the image of judgment with its danger and its promise should then be read not as threat but as encouragement to believers to take seriously the challenges of their present lives, receiving the gift and leaving some things to God's good time. Significantly, this lectionary reading is followed by three more parables (vv. 44–50, the gospel reading for Pentecost 9) which reinforce the image of the gift worth present sacrifice as well as the importance of leaving the final sorting to God's angels.

Pastoral Reflections

In this Pentecost season, the time of the church, a hymn of encouragement to believers could be a good foundation for the sermon (e.g., ELW 633, "We've Come this Far by Faith").

As I said above, I think the lectionary has made a problematic omission from the Matthew text. Because I would likely use confidence in God's work as the centering theme of my sermon, I would be careful not to let the parable in Matthew 13:24–30 be overwhelmed or controlled by the allegorical interpretation (vv. 36–43). The former acknowledges the reality of weeds but keeps attention on the importance of the promised harvest. The latter focuses graphically on a final judgment.

The whole of 13:24–43 could be read aloud, perhaps with multiple readers, to preserve Matthew's own literary separation between the parable and the allegory. Even so, the preacher would likely need to highlight explicitly the differing nuances in the two sections. The texts are so familiar that using the lectionary's shortened version could easily make judgment the default theme for the whole. I am convinced that in this pericope, as in the whole of chapter 13, the essential message is the dependability of God's promises. The preacher should follow the texts in acknowledging the challenges of Christian living, including the risk of failure, but this will be most effectively and faithfully done by maintaining the message of confidence. One could recognize the presence of "weeds" in our own lives and our communities as a threat to well-grounded confidence and a specific reason to nurture our own and others' confidence in God. A refrain could be Ps 86:15, "But you, O LORD, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."

Paul also keeps the assurance of salvation central, while recognizing the realities of tension and suffering for believers. Romans 8:25 sums up Paul's double conviction with the theme of patience for this time of hope not yet fulfilled. I think patience is a helpful parallel to the gospel's theme of not reacting to sin in ourselves and others in ways that could threaten the promised harvest of faith. Patience is possible not because we think everything will work out fine but because our hope is in God. I join Paul in seeing the Spirit's assurance in our practice of addressing God as Abba, beloved Father and Mother. Salvation is present and sure, and it is surely within a theology of the cross.

Stan Olson

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
July 30, 2023

1 Kings 3:5–12
Psalm 119:129–136
Romans 8:26–39
Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

Engaging the Texts

> *"Have you understood all this?"*
> *They answered, "Yes."*

The disciples are liars.

They nodded and smiled at the series of parables. Maybe a few chimed in with a look-how-smart-and-thoughtful-I-am, "hmmm." Then after, as they rose and brushed the sand from their robes their faces clouded over with questions. Maybe a couple hung back and directed a confused glance at one another, whispering, "Mustard seed?"

No one wants to admit they don't get it. Especially when Jesus had just quoted Isaiah (13:10b–17):

> You will indeed listen, but never understand,
> and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this
> people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard
> of hearing, and they have shut their eyes, so that they
> might not look with their eyes and listen with their
> ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and
> I would heal them.
>
> But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your
> ears, for they hear.

The disciples are liars, but can we really blame them? Followers all want these words to be true. That we may possess these eyes, these ears. That we may be the ones who finally get it and live up to Jesus' hope. But as soon as those followers got the chance to embrace the kingdom, they fumble and falter and show that they don't understand at all. They beg Jesus to send the hungry crowds away because they cannot perceive how it is possible to feed them. Even when Jesus says, "They need not go away, you give them something to eat," they still

cannot hear it. Their eyes do not see beyond the five loaves and two fish, so their hands will not be up to the task. Then in crossing the sea they are terrified when they see Jesus walking on the water. It is not enough to hear Jesus' words of comfort. Peter asks for more proof, and it is still not enough to get him there on his own.

The scholars that selected the other lectionary texts appear to be wise to the disciples' shortcoming. We begin in 1 Kings with Solomon asking, "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people to be able to discern." Solomon knows what he does not, and he's not afraid to admit it. Therefore, God gives him a "wise and discerning mind." The psalmist meditates on lifelong learning. The reading from Romans acknowledges that "we do not know how to pray as we ought." But assurances are given to those "called according to his purpose." The Spirit intercedes. Lucky for us, "sighs too deep for words," are not exactly words we need to hear and comprehend, but instead a chord that can't help but resonate within us. All the other lessons acknowledge it's not easy and often not possible to understand this kingdom of heaven. But there are guides along the way, gifts of holy insight, and sometimes truths so deep they can only be felt.

Pastoral Reflections

It continues to surprise me how many people don't see humor in the scriptures. For many, the **Holy Bible** is something that cannot be funny. ***It is HOLY! There is nothing funny about HOLINESS!*** As such, some may also find it a bit distressing to hear and see the humanity in the scriptures. That the woman at the well might be sassy, that Thomas is not only doubting but sarcastic, that a story might set us up to laugh at the disciples? Inconceivable! But again, can we blame them? I have been told of church practices in which the lector was not allowed to make eye contact with the congregation. Congregants who were taught they were not allowed to look up while they were listening. That the scripture must be read without emphasis or emotion from a giant leather-covered tome. In attempting to elevate the scriptures, these practices have in many ways distanced the story from the people. Disembodied words. Not of this earth. That makes it hard for the average listener to engage with the story. It makes it difficult to see what it has to do with them and their ordinary lives. It is less likely to stick.

Remember that long before the gospels were words on a page, storytellers traveled from village to village to share the good news. The storytellers carried the good news in their bodies and used those earthly bodies to communicate the story. The people crowded together on the dusty ground to see and hear. It was an event, more than a lesson; an experience more than a teaching. The parables are particularly earthy: seeds and weeds, leavening bread, fields, pearls, and fish. Perhaps more than to understand, the parables are an occasion to experience the Kingdom of heaven right here on earth. These are images that the people could actually grasp. These tricky little stories would come to mind as they passed mustard growing wild in the field, tempting them to shake loose a seed to fiddle with as they walked. As a woman was kneading bread, the fishermen sorting the fish, a farmer walking in the field, an admirer taking in the simple, accessible beauty of a pearl—these all become opportunities to ponder the kingdom of heaven.

Is there a way to make these well-known old treasures new? Despite what they claimed, the disciples did not achieve understanding. Maybe that is not the point. Rather than offering answers, help the congregation enter into the parable. The experiences are no longer commonplace for all, so can the proclamation or preaching offer a hands-on opportunity? This doesn't mean that it's time for a parable petting zoo. Not every congregation is up for sorting slimy cold fish or kneading sticky bread dough, but there are other ways to create tangible (or nearly so) experiences of these short and surprising stories. The goal is to help the people hear the parables in a way that they may come to mind as they go about their ordinary tasks during the rest of their week.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 6, 2023

Isaiah 55:1–5
Psalm 145:8–9, 14–21
Romans 9:1–5
Matthew14:13–21

Engaging the Texts

The disciples fall short again this week when it comes to feeding the hungry crowd. They had already been given "authority over unclean spirits" and the ability to "cure every disease and every illness" in chapter 10. But even though they know what is possible, they did not try. They have been watching Jesus heal every sick person in the crowd. Still, they do not ask for his help. Standing in their way is not their limited abilities or a lack of faith in Jesus. It's not about inadequate resources, either. The disciples don't see the hungry crowd as their responsibility. It's not their problem. Instead, they ask Jesus to "send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Only after Jesus orders them to act do they point to the five loaves and two fish as justification for their behavior.

The lectionary texts reveal a God of plenty who provides

for the people's real and pressing needs. There is no mention of the deserving poor, means testing, or limits. Isaiah and the Psalm do not speak of just some, but *everyone*, *all*, *every living thing*. The psalmist praises, "the Lord is good to all and his compassion is over all that he has made." But what about the servants of the Lord? The lectionary offers up a contrast with Paul and the disciples who struggle with the calling to be part of this abundant life. Who is in and who is out? What are the limits? Where do we draw the line? While the followers ask these questions, the Lord is unequivocal with the answers: No one. There are none. No limits.

The feeding of the five thousand appears in all four Gospels. The only other miracle that is this consistent across all Gospels is the resurrection. Feeding hungry people is not just important, it is a core aspect of who Jesus is. This is also the story of discipleship—expectations and disappointment. In John the disciples ask exasperated questions until Jesus steps in. But in all three of the synoptics Jesus gives the disciples a charge: *you give them something to eat*. Jesus does not qualify who should be given food, or how much, or under what circumstances. Jesus wants the followers to take part in the work of feeding any and all who are hungry. They will again and again balk at the task, and Jesus will have to show them how it is done.

Pastoral Reflections

During my short time serving in the state legislature, I have witnessed self–proclaimed Christians champion legislation to make food assistance harder for poor families to attain. A particularly vocal "Bible believing" lobbying group refused to speak on behalf of feeding hungry neighbors (I had asked them). Despite outcry from every local agency and non-profit serving low-income Iowans, the bill passed. Now pending the governor's signature, all Iowans who seek the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, aka Food Stamps) will need to provide documentation of every asset in addition to meeting existing stringent eligibility requirements. When a similar measure was adopted in the state of Pennsylvania, 110,000 qualifying residents were removed from the SNAP program because they could not complete the paperwork. Pennsylvania discontinued the program after three years because in addition to being harmful, it was incredibly expensive. Under this new law, Iowa will have to spend four times more than it currently does to administer the SNAP program and add 219 full time employees just to manage these additional eligibility requirements. This new law won't save our state any money. Aside from administrative costs, SNAP is fully funded with federal dollars.

As a pastor, I am very reluctant to use scripture or speak personally about my faith during legislative proceedings. But during debate on this bill, I quoted Jesus' command in Matthew, Mark, and Luke: *you give them something to eat.* A legislator who hosts a weekly Bible study in the capitol told me I was taking this scripture out of context. Then as justification for his support he quoted 2 Thessalonians 3:10—a line from a letter to a specific community that more than likely was not written by Paul.

Many Christians feel that there must be restrictions on who and how we feed. We do live in a world of limited resources. But is that the primary concern? I recall one small town pastor who bragged how he displayed his police chaplain badge in his office so that anyone seeking help would be sure to see it. While that piece of tin did not help discern true need, it did serve to intimidate. Worthiness is a sticking point for the followers every time we are called to feed others in Jesus' name. The central act of our worship is a meal—which has been an occasion for millennia of disagreement and division for just such a reason. As my first-call congregation was struggling through the ELCA's sexuality decision of 2009, one of my congregants railed about having unrepentant sinners at the Lord's Supper. This same man walked into the church every Sunday for years and refused to speak to his own mother seated a couple pews away. I once had a young child reach out to grab the communion bread, only to have the parent smack away their hand.

I guess this is all true to the story of the disciples. Jesus' call to feed is simple and expansive. We complicate and restrict. But Jesus is there to show us how it could be in the promise that one day it will.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 13, 2023

1 Kings 19:9–18
Psalm 85:8–13
Romans 10:5–15
Matthew 14:22–33

Engaging the texts for preaching

Although we may want to crawl into a cave and sleep at times, I'm not sure that is a good preparation for proclaiming the word. God asks Elijah—twice—"What are you doing here?" Elijah repeats the same answer—twice—which doesn't answer God's question at all! Elijah's reply is a complaint about how bad it has been for Israel and for him. Even after the earthquake, wind, fire, and the gentle whisper, Elijah still doesn't know how to answer this question:

What are you doing here?

I think, if we're honest, we're in the same cave as Elijah. Violence and oppression continue to assault God's people, often done by God's people themselves. Polarization and fear seem to have a grip on the land. The injustice of our times can paralyze us or lead us to despair. Who doesn't want to cry out to God? And frankly, who doesn't want God to respond with earthquake, fire, and wind? But God keeps asking:

What are *we* doing here?

Note that God is not indifferent to Elijah's plight, but interestingly God's response is "Go." First, go to the mountain to meet God's surprising power, then go right back to the trouble from which you came. God's message to the prophet in distress is not consolation, but mission.

Elijah's complaint is heard by God. God doesn't dispute how terrible his situation is. He doesn't deny the violence and infidelity of the people of Israel. But God does not take the prophet out of that reality; rather God sends him back with a mission. And with the power to anoint two kings and Elijah's own successor.

I wonder what Elijah felt as he left that mountain.

I wonder what we feel when we cry out to God about how challenging our reality is, and God commands us to go right back into it.

To say the least, I don't think God is sending us today to anoint practitioners of the sword, at least not literal ones! Thank God for Psalm 85, and its promise that love and faithfulness will join together; that justice and peace will kiss (my translation). As in the Romans text, the psalmist's promises are sure because God is near, not far away on some distant mountain. Indeed, so near that the Word is in our mouth and in our heart (Rom 10:8).

The Romans text reminds us that we don't need a mountaintop—or a walk on the surface of the deep, as in the Gospel—to access the power of God's transforming love.

I must admit, I don't know how to bring something new to the story of Jesus walking on the water and Peter walking and sinking. Maybe this story is as simple as it is strange. The disciples are afraid of God's amazing power in Jesus; Jesus tells them to take courage. Peter starts his walk with faith but loses it when he looks at his reality; Jesus saves him and upbraids him for lack of faith. Maybe it's as simple as that: don't be afraid and don't doubt. Two things nearly impossible for us to do, and yet the way of Jesus compels us into a faith that will risk.

Jesus doesn't calm the storm until they are back in the boat. Walking on calm seas is one thing, walking in the storms of life is another. Jesus gives Peter, and by extension us, the privilege of trusting God amid our challenging reality.

And it may be obvious, but Jesus doesn't throw Peter out of the boat or let him drown! Peter's lack of faith does not disqualify him from full fellowship in the community of faith. In fact, Jesus' reply to Peter ends with a question that echoes God's question to Elijah: Why did you doubt? It is an open invitation to Peter and the others to search deep into themselves. God is not afraid of questions and is patient with us as we struggle with them.

Patrick Cabello Hansel

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 20, 2023

Isaiah 56:1, 6–8
Psalm 67
Romans 11:1–2, 29–32
Matthew 15:[10–20,] 21–28

Engaging the texts for preaching

I met Gustavo Gutierrez, often called the Father of Liberation Theology, in a swimming pool in San Antonio, Texas. I expected to see a giant of a man, given his reputation. But he is relatively short and carries a physical handicap since contracting a debilitating disease in his youth. I also did not expect him to give one of the most profound interpretations of law and gospel, this coming from a Roman Catholic priest.

Gutierrez didn't use the terms law and gospel, however. Rather, he said that every biblical text contains a challenge from God and a promise from God. The challenge, he said, is often impossible, or next to it (thus convicting us); the promise is often greater than what we imagined, or even what we were seeking.

Today's lessons, I think, reflect that teaching. "Maintain justice and do what is right," says Isaiah (v. 1). Easier said than done, right? It's what we long for, but we've seen that the justice we thought we had won is now under attack by forces of fear and division. *Maintaining* justice is often much harder than *fighting* for justice.

God gives the promise to go with the challenge: "my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed." (v. 1) Thank God! I'm sure these were welcome words to the exiles returning to a ravaged land.

But by verse 6, Isaiah has expanded that promise far beyond what the exiles might have imagined. Verses 6–8 extend God's invitation to redemption to foreigners. God's house (not even rebuilt) will be "a house of prayer for all peoples" (v. 7). God "will gather still others… besides those already gathered."

I bet that some of the returning Israelites didn't think too highly of this promise. *We're finally free from seventy years held captive with "the nations" and God wants to invite them into*

"our house"? Yes! And even more, God invites the nations to be ministers with the people of God. The foreigners are not just going to sit in the back and receive whatever the people of God decide to give them. They are welcome to give the gifts they have as full members of the community of faith.

There has got to be a better word than "inclusion" for all of this. The nations are not invited by the people of God to come to "their" ceremonies. They are invited by God to be full actors in the salvation story. God is expanding who the people are!

It is a radical teaching, echoed in Psalm 67. The psalmist asks for God's blessing on the people, *so that* God's salvation may be known among "all nations" (v.3). The promise is that all "the nations will be glad and sing for joy" (v.4), and "all the ends of the earth will fear God" (v.8). The people of God ask for blessing *so that* all people may be blessed. (Note that, ironically, the text from Romans echoes this as well. The new Gentile Christians are reminded—and not so gently either—that they are not now the "in group" deciding about God's promises for the "others," in this case, the Jewish people).

And then there is this Gospel from Matthew. In the first part of chapter 15, Jesus argues with the Pharisees who cling to a received ritual of washing while ignoring God's command to care for the vulnerable elderly. Jesus then leads his disciples to a land considered ritually impure. You would think it was the perfect place to practice what he just preached. Here is a woman, a foreigner and caretaker of a vulnerable child. Yet, Jesus seems to reject her outright. And with a nasty slur at that.

What can we make of this? It is hard to think of Jesus as racist, but his words are right there. Did he honestly believe the saying he repeated? It appears to be a proverbial phrase, like "let sleeping dogs lie," but the phrase Jesus repeats is intended to make it clear who is in and who is out.

The woman is smart enough, brave enough, and maybe desperate enough to hope that there is a lot more to Jesus than what may have been a common slur against those who were deemed to be "less than."

Maybe the woman sees something in what Jesus is *doing*, rather than what he is *saying*. He says he "was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (v. 24), but it isn't by chance that he and his saving power are walking around Tyre and Sidon. I don't think Jesus went there for a vacation. Maybe he wanted to be challenged in his faith, for faith untested is not really faith. The result is the promise of healing to the woman and her daughter.

It's not easy being faithful to God's demanding challenges and surprising promises, is it?

Patrick Cabello Hansel

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost August 27, 2023

Isaiah 51:1–6
Psalm 138
Romans 12:1–8
Matthew 16:13–20

Engaging the Texts

During this long season of "Ordinary Time," the lectionary guides us through two separate journeys: the Gospel of Matthew and large sections of the Epistles. While there is often a connection between the Gospel and the Hebrew Bible lesson, the lectionary's intention for the Epistle is a semi-continuous reading, so there may not be any evident connection to the other lessons.

The reading from Second Isaiah was composed during the time of exile in Babylon. This change in perspective and worldview in the text affects how we hear the words millennia later. When you are thousands of miles from the temple, which has been destroyed, how do you know where to look for God, or to be the people of God? God likens the people to rocks that have been hewn, a permanent part of the landscape, and reminds them that God can be found in all of creation. The promises of deliverance and salvation are not dependent on what's going on in the world—which is largely out of their (and our) control—but rather are rooted in the goodness of God. These promises are even more important when they are not sure they can find God at all. The promises of God reach beyond the Promised Land.

This section of Romans has a familiar feel, but there are a couple unique phrases that are worth attention. As people who value incarnation and the call to live faithfully in this life (not being concerned *only* with "getting to heaven") it might be interesting to explore "spiritual worship" and "not to be conformed to this world." Unpacking these in the frame of vocation and community could open a deeper understanding beyond setting "us vs. them," keeping us faithful to the following phrase not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought!

Although this is a fairly short episode in Matthew, there's much to consider here! For one, Jesus and the disciples are in Caesarea Philippi at the time of this confession. This is a Gentile area known for its temple to Pan. What difference might that make in the strength of this declaration of who Jesus is? Is it stronger because Peter calls Jesus "Messiah" while surrounded by other gods, or weaker because anyone who hears *here* is (perhaps) less likely to challenge Jesus? There has been a lot going on in this middle section of the gospel: teaching, healing, feeding, walking on water, being challenged by

foreigners and religious leaders. Peter is a central character, putting pieces together from what he's observing, what Jesus can do as well as how Jesus interacts with others, and it adds up, for him, to mean that Jesus is the Messiah. Unpacking what expectations Peter may have had about Messiah, and how Jesus is meeting them, would be helpful for listeners.

Another interesting piece is the name. The narrator consistently calls him "Peter," but Jesus addresses him directly only once, here, and calls him "Simon, son of Jonah" initially, then "Peter" when he makes the rock reference. (Look ahead: in the next episode Jesus will call him "Satan"!) The name Jonah, referring to the Hebrew Bible prophet, has been dropped twice already in Matthew (12:38–41, 16:4). What might it mean that Peter is recognized as a "son of Jonah"? Will he go where this path of Jesus leads him, or run the other way? His second name, Peter, is of course a play on the Greek word for "rock." Is the rock on which the assembly of believers will be built the person of Peter (thus the tradition of the papacy), or Peter's faithfulness? We have seen this rock sink in chapter 14, and we know he is hard-headed. What is the significance of the "rock" part of his name here?

And finally, notice that Jeremiah is named as one whom Jesus may potentially be. Jeremiah is the one quoted in the opening verses of Matthew, the one who calls on Rachel to weep for the children who have died (2:17–18). Jesus is a Messiah rooted in the prophets and the ancestors, come to call out, redeem, and repair the brokenness of creation.

Pastoral Reflections

I suspect the challenging part of this story is hearing Jesus direct his question to YOU: "Who do YOU say that I am, listener?" Well, who DO we say Jesus is? Have we, like Peter, seen all that we need to see to get to the answer? And what if we don't have an answer? Are all the answers OK, or right, or wrong? How will we know? In my ministry I observe that some people long for and cling to certainty–they want *one* answer, and they want it to be right no matter what. Others think whatever someone believes is fine, as long as they're nice–they'll take any answer as long as it makes sense. Many have been wounded by *one* answer, or confused, or left out if they couldn't embrace it fully. Others want something, anything, to hold on to, just give them something solid. Jesus' question calls us away from these extremes, toward the center that is him and that is true. How we think about Jesus as Messiah (that we think about it) makes a difference. Perhaps a sermon can be a dedicated time to explore Jesus' question for your community.

[*The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford Press, 2011) and Richard Swanson's *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew* (Pilgrim Press, 2007) were helpful in composing this article.]

Lori Ruge-Jones

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 3, 2023

Jeremiah 15:15–21
Psalm 26:1–8
Romans 12:9–21
Matthew 16:21–28

Engaging the Texts

The lesson from Romans offers specificity about how followers of Jesus are to live their lives. Each sentence lays out what it looks like when we walk the way that Jesus has set before us. In fact, Jesus has not only set that way before us; he has gone that way before we ever do … or don't. He has shown us how to live in the way God deeply desires. We can see in his flesh what the satisfaction of God's longing looks like. When Jesus lived in this way, he met hostility. His genuine love and his opposition to what is evil led those who orchestrated evil to oppose him. His patient, hopeful, prayerful persistence was required because his way of life was not loved by powerful people. His insistence on actively and concretely loving his enemies earned him more enemies. In short, the world would not embrace a love like his. And what shape did this love take? Genuineness, persistence, affectionateness, mutuality, hospitality, accompaniment with those shoved to the bottom, non-violence. This is the only way through which we shall overcome some day.

Choosing this way means standing amid profound tensions. Jeremiah helps us to see that often this tension begins within ourselves. We hear the prophet as he expresses in equal measure devotion to God and disappointment in God. He knows not where to land. The Word of God offers him both delight and indigestion. But God listens to all that Jeremiah has to say and then promises that if Jeremiah waits persistently, God will satisfy his longed-for hope.

Multiple tensions within run through the community of faith in Jeremiah's day and again in Jesus' time. We are not surprised because they run through our communities. Peter who on the same day that he confessed Jesus now wants to hinder Jesus' obedience to what God and the moment demand. Peter has a point because traumatic threats run through the world; he has heard clearly what this will cost Jesus whom he loves.

Jesus sees what is inevitable given the way he must live his life. He sets himself firmly on that way and begs his followers to follow him on the journey ahead. Knowing that this future is inevitable does not make Jesus' road easy. The ones he invites to follow will only do so for a time. But Jesus trusts that the God of life will find a way forward on the third day. By God, the world that God loves and longs for will be gained.

Pastoral Reflections

On this Labor Day weekend, we remember that our labor is called for in this world in its many dimensions. God is calling us to the labor of making the world a more just and gracious place. Like labor in childbirth, this task is fraught with danger and comes with a cost. New life comes through a process of pushing and resting and pushing again; suffering and joy are inevitably intertwined in this delivery and deliverance.

As you unpack the way that God calls us to live, begin with Paul's descriptions. As his letter to the Romans makes the nature of love clear by spelling it out, explore the specificity even more deeply by asking members of your congregation where they have seen genuineness, persistence, affectionateness, mutuality, hospitality, accompaniment of those shoved to the bottom, non-violence in their own lives. During this week, gather stories of what your local community has learned about walking with Jesus. Be honest about the costs that came with acts and attitudes of faithfulness.

Or perhaps this is a good day to remind our people as Jesus does that the journey ahead will entail tensions as suffering and joy find themselves at war within us, within our own communities, and within the world that has not dedicated itself to what Jesus proposes.

Many people, speaking of faith today, promise a way that will be trouble-free, peaceful, unending in material abundance. The gospel makes a very different promise and we all need to be reminded of that. Bernice Johnson Reagon of Sweet Honey in the Rock, the phenomenal black gospel *a cappella* group, captured the challenge and gift that Jesus offers us well in a live concert. She proclaimed, "It's good news when you reject things as they are, when you lay down the world as it is, and you take on the responsibility of shaping your own way. That's good news. Everybody talk about spirituals and they say, 'Oh Lord, black folk sing about goin' to heaven.' No, this message is for you tonight [in this very place]… Lay down the world, pick up my cross. And they don't say it's good times. They say good news. It's hard times when you decide to pick up your own cross. You goin' catch hell if you don't do it the way they say do it. But when you lay down the world and shoulder up your cross, that's what?" The knowing crowd responds, "Good news!" (From the song "Good News" on the album *Good News, Flying Fish,* 1981). May our congregations join that crowd of witnesses in promising to walk the way that Jesus lays before us.

Phil Ruge-Jones

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 10, 2023

Ezekiel 33:7–11
Psalm 119:33–40
Romans 13:8–14
Matthew 18:15–20

> Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. *(Psalm 119:34)*

Binding and Loosing

Nearing the end of his epistle to the church in Rome that he had yet to visit personally, Paul is in a more irenic mood than earlier in his letter. In today's reading he remembers the words of Jesus that the early tradition of the church had handed down in which he is quoting Torah: "*Love your neighbor as yourself."* After puzzling through in the preceding chapters God's eternal election of Israel in the light of what he felt to be God's turn to the Gentiles in his own apostolic calling, Paul here—as he rarely does—chooses to cite the traditioned *ippisima verba* of Jesus: "*Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law* (v. 10).

"Discipline" is a little-appreciated dimension in the life of being a disciple from which the word itself derives. At its best discipline refers to the formation through which one is "discipled" and shaped into being a follower. In this regard, Paul's counsel to the Romans to count love of neighbor as the fulfillment and summary of all that Torah was meant to teach is his effort to instruct the church in the discipline of love. By implication such bad behaviors as "*reveling and drunkenness," debauchery and licentiousness," "quarreling and jealousy*" (v. 13), that Paul singles out for mention are examples of actions that offend against the command to love one's neighbor and do him/her no wrong.

Our reading from Matthew 18 contains a passage that is said to be the only scripture cited in the ELCA's *Model Constitution for Congregations* (in the section dealing with "Discipline and Adjudication of Members"). The passage likely owes its origin to a practice of the early church that encouraged a process for reconciling differences between members. Over time it may have evolved into a process for handling accusations of sinful behavior as in Matthew's passage itself and eventually charges of false teaching. The advice is simple and outlines a common–sense approach that experts in conflict resolution still recommend. It begins with going personally, by oneself, to the person with your concern one–on–one. "*If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.*" If you are not listened to, "*take one or two others with you*" as witnesses. "*If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and*

if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and tax collector" (vv. 15–17).

The NT scholar Mark Allen Powell has helpfully and sensitively exegeted this passage along with the ensuing, often misunderstood, words of Jesus, *"whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*" (v. 18). Powell explains that "the phrase 'to bind and loose' refers to the rabbinic activity of discerning the will of God for the present day by determining how commandments of the law apply in contemporary situations," that is, whether they are to be strictly interpreted ("bound") or judged inapplicable ("loosed"). Jesus himself was known to both bind the law in matters of adultery (5:27–28) and loose it in matters relating to the sabbath (12:1–7). The church, Powell argues, is here authorized by Jesus to continue his important activity of binding and loosing.[4]

In an important application of the church's authority to bind and loose, Powell suggests that this passage should be understood as scriptural authorization for the church's responsibility to consider such controverted issues as the ordination and marriage of persons in same-sex, committed relationships. Binding and loosing becomes a way in which the church is authorized by scripture to reconsider a teaching—especially one involving possible discipline—and change its mind and teaching, including whether certain behaviors constitute "sin." The church's rethinking and loosing of Jesus' own clear teaching on divorce (5:31–32, 19:2–9) is one such example.

At the same time, the bottom line of church discipline, letting the "*offender [who]*

refuses to listen to the church" be treated as a "*Gentile and tax collector*" (v. 17) is not the final, excluding punishment it initially may appear to be, Powell believes. He argues that we need to hear Jesus' harsh-sounding conclusion as tinged with his characteristic irony, for who was more pilloried by his opponents for his indiscriminate welcome of and table fellowship with Gentiles and tax collectors than Jesus himself?[5]

As Powell points out in another book, Jesus' concluding promise "*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,*" should not be understood as a defense of poorly attended church gatherings. Rather, he asserts, "two or three" is not to suggest a spiritual quorum of how few it takes for Jesus' presence to be felt but, rather, how many. "It takes two or three, which is to say more than one," implying that the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ is not realized in any one individual but, definitively in the fellowship or interaction that takes place between individuals."[6] For Christ to be truly present he needs a body, a healthy, disciplined body functioning together in love. As Brian Wren's hymn puts it,

"Love alone unites us
wakens and invites us.
Nothing else can root and ground us.
Habits of compliance,
dictates and defiance,
soon dispirit and confound us.
If by law we keep score,
pride will soon divide us.
Love alone shall guide us!"
—*Bring Many Names, #24*

John Rollefson

Holy Cross Day
September 14, 2023

Numbers 21:4b–9
Psalm 98:1–4 or Psalm 78:1–2, 34–38
1 Corinthians 1:18–24
John 3:13–17

O sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
—*Psalm 96:1*

The Foolishness of the Cross

Ordinary Christians, especially of the Lutheran variety, might be forgiven for assuming that Holy Cross Day is just a fancy name for Good Friday. But Holy Cross Day is one of those "Lesser Festivals and Occasions" marked annually by the church, this one always on September 14. Usually this does not fall on a Sunday and so is not widely observed in public worship. In fact, the day has a complicated and somewhat peculiar history, arising out of the legendary tradition that St. Helena, the Emperor Constantine's mother, discovered the cross of Jesus in Jerusalem in 326 C.E. Upon this discovery, her son began construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, dedicated on this date in 335.

The Roman Catholic name for the day, "Triumph of the Cross," was changed recently to "Exaltation of the Cross," celebrating the cross itself as the sign of salvation. Let us not forget that the emperor emblazoned this same sign on his legions' regalia as a symbol of his empire's God-favored invincibility.

Consider as well, such disturbing but popular hymns as "Lift High the Cross" (LBW 377, ELW 660) with its trou-

4. Mark Allen Powell. *God With Us: A Pastoral Theology of Matthew's Gospel* (Fortress Press, 1995), 67-68.
5. Powell, *God With Us*, 87.
6. Mark Allen Powell. *Loving Jesus* (Fortress Press, 2004), 32-33.

bling militaristic imagery: "Come, Christians, follow where our captain trod, our king victorious, Christ the Son of God" (v. 1). The hymn traces its origin to such ancient plainsong as the sixth century "Pange Lingua," which sings in its opening lines, "Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle; tell the triumph far and wide; tell aloud the wondrous story of the cross, the Crucified…" (ELW 355). In "celebrating" Holy Cross Day by focusing on the sign of the cross as a symbol of our salvation through Jesus' cross—and, of course, his resurrection—the challenge is for the church not to indulge in what Luther diagnosed as a "theology of glory." Rather we are called to engage in a kind of decolonializing and de-imperializing effort fully appropriate to what Luther called the "theology of the cross," his proclamation of the truth of "telling things like they really are" in his Heidelberg Disputation.

Here the texts provided us by the Revised Common Lectionary serve us well, replacing some more problematic selections of lectionaries for this day. Especially welcome is Paul's wisdom-hymn to the Gospel proclamation as "Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1: 22–24). Here is revealed the utter foolishness of the cross as in the down-to-earth *bon mot* of Fr. Dan Berigan when he once quipped regarding the path of resistance Jesus and his followers were called to take: "before you go that route, you'd better make sure you 'look good on wood.'" Or there's the show-stopping observation that before selecting a cross to adorn one's neck one might consider that it's tantamount to wearing a miniature electric chair as a necklace.

As the Episcopal preacher, lecturer, and author Fleming Rutledge noted in her dense and profound book of a few years ago titled *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus* (2015) regarding the fact that Christianity is utterly original among all the great faith traditions in claiming a crucified man as the central figure of its faith: nothing in all religious history can approach "crucifixion for crudeness."[7] That's what both Paul and Luther mean by promoting a theology of the cross rather than a theology of glory.

Our text from Numbers is the story that Jesus recalls in his "Nick at Nite" conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus in John 3. The story Jesus remembers is a curious one, since the "snake on a stick" was what the Israelites were to look upon to be healed from the bites of the snakes that Yahweh had sent to punish them for their complaining. (Anthropologists might call this a form of "sympathetic magic" in which the cause of the problem becomes the solution.) At any rate, Jesus uses this old, well-known story from his people's tradition to proclaim the contrarian good news of his impending death on a cross in a shockingly apt metaphor: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." This is followed immediately by the words of John 3:16, what Luther called "the gospel in miniature" as well as what I consider the even "better good news" of John 3:17.

Not to be overlooked, however, on this Holy Cross Day is the utter fittingness of Jesus' invoking the snake on a stick of Moses' time as an analogue of the cross. Jesus imagines himself in the place of the serpent on the pole, lifted high that all might look on him in their desperation and instead of perishing from the poison of their sin, be healed, and inoculated for eternal life with the antitoxin of God's forgiving grace.

The peculiar theological genius that lies embedded in this story, of course, is that God is sufficiently canny and creative as to turn the very source of his people's dying into the thing that would become the source of their healing/salvation, that is, Jesus' death on the cross. Perhaps no hymn sounds truer on this Holy Cross Day than the humble, oldie-but-goodie "Beneath the Cross of Jesus" (ELW 338).

John Rollefson

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 17, 2023

Genesis 50:15–21
Psalm 103: [1–7], 8–13
Romans 14:1–12
Matthew 18:21–35

Reflections on the Texts

Forgiveness is a thread that connects our texts this Sunday. This thread is rooted in the fundamental character of the God of Israel, voiced this week in Psalm 103 and next week in Psalm 145: *Adonai* is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. In an era where people hold tightly to a God of reward and punishment, it feels especially important to remember that God abounds in compassion and mercy, and faithful love!

Adonai's compassion, mercy, and steadfast love are the source for our work in the world. Steadfast love is the wellspring from which justice flows and wholeness arises, for ourselves, for our neighbors, and for the whole of creation. We love because God first embraces us with loving kindness. Forgiveness is a way of extending this love to others and helping build the bridges we need for the wholeness we seek.

I wonder though about the direct and indirect presence of enslaved individuals throughout these stories about for-

7. Fleming Rutledge. *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 2015), 490.

giveness. How are we to deal with this? Certainly, this is a recognition of how ubiquitous systemic evil is in our world. It is also a reminder not to pull on the forgiveness thread too quickly, thoughtlessly, or casually.

While forgiveness might be appropriate along our journey, it is not the journey itself—fruit, but not the tree. Forgiveness, redemption, repair, and reconciliation all flow from the wellspring of *Adonai's* mercy. The journey is long, requiring hard, multi-generational, communal engagement.

When Jesus instructs Peter about forgiveness—not seven times, but seventy-seven times —he is reminding him of this. Forgiveness is not an isolated happening, but a lifestyle connected to other patterns and practices; something to commit to over and over again so that it changes who we are in the world.

But then, in a way that I find uncomfortable, Jesus illustrates his teaching about forgiveness with a story about an enslaver sovereign who satisfies a debt by selling off his debtor servant, together with his wife and children and all his possessions. We know of parents who instruct, even prod their children into forgiving one another. But I can't see them using an illustration like this. What do we do with this story?

The west coast university town in which I work currently bears the name of an eighteenth century esteemed Irish philosopher/theologian Bishop George Berkeley. He was also an owner of enslaved people, a promoter of racist ideologies, and a defender of slavery's merit and necessity. In 1730 Bishop Berkeley purchased the human beings, Philip, Anthony, Edward, and Agnes, to work on an estate he owned in Rhode Island. He owned these individuals just like he owned the property upon which they worked.

Recently, when the trustees of the Berkeley Library at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland became conscious of this part of his legacy, they voted to drop his name from the building, finding its continued use inconsistent with the university's core values of human dignity, freedom, inclusivity, and equality.[8] The leaders of our little town on the Pacific west coast have declined similar action, saying, Berkeley is now more associated with a different set of values and perspectives.[9]

When we think about forgiveness and the story that Jesus uses about the enslaver sovereign might we not at the same time consider the lives of Philip, Anthony, Edward, and Agnes and the countless others caught up by this systemic evil? Do they have something to say about this text?

Professor Wilda Gafney suggests that there is vulnerability to explore in this gospel text. The spouses of the debtors and their children were vulnerable; however, the overarching vulnerability is due to the uncontested ubiquitous slavery that not even Jesus challenges.[10] It is not enough anymore to use the story in the way Jesus does as illustrative of forgiveness seventy-seven times. More is demanded from us.

In Genesis, slavery is a memory, a strategy, and an anticipation. There is Joseph's trauma of having been trafficked into slavery by his scoundrel brothers after their attempt to kill him fails. Now these same siblings appear before him in desperate need. Joseph weeps and gives them the food and organizes the protection they need to survive.

Joseph's craftiness and good fortune have placed him as the second most powerful position under Pharaoh. He is a sycophantic political aide helping a weak political leader weather a crisis and emerges more powerful than he could have imagined![11] To deal with the ravaging famine he creates a strategy to require Egyptians to divest themselves of their homes, crops, land, livestock in exchange for food during the famine. This is a clever system and enslaves the Egyptians to Pharaoh. It also anticipates the enslavement years later of his own people, the Israelites, after Joseph dies, and a new Pharaoh ascends who knows nothing of him.

Professor Gafney reminds us that the systemic evil of slavery has survived many manifestations, as an unjust, dehumanizing institution utilized by the Egyptians and other ancient people including the Israelites, or chattel slavery in North and South America and the Caribbean, or the contemporary sexual trafficking of women, girls, and boys.[12]

The tragic irony in Joseph's case is that the enslaved becomes the enslaver and creates the very system responsible for the enslavement of his own people.

We might weep with him at the sight of his brothers pleading for their lives, relieved that he does the right thing and refrains from revenge. But his forgiveness of them does little to repair the trauma of his past visited upon his present and future. To forgive is not to forget. To forgive is not to ignore. To forgive is not to release from the responsibility/obligation for repair, reparations, restoration, and justice.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are fruit born of the multigenerational practices of acknowledgment, truth-telling, repentance, and reparations.

I live in Oakland and work in Berkeley, both cities on stolen land, the unceded territory of the Chochenyo speaking Ohlone people known as xučyun (Huichin). When we gather as a community, we make an acknowledgment to the original stewards of this land and express our gratitude for being

8. https://www.tcd.ie/news_events/top-stories/featured/trinity-college-dublin-to-dename-the-berkeley-library/

9. https://www.ktvu.com/news/city-of-berkeley-cal-named-after-irish-slave-owner/

10. Wilda Gafney. *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church: Year A*, (Church Publishing Inc.), 231.

11. Isaac Luria. https://auburnseminary.org/voices/exodus-really-started/

12. https://www.wilgafney.com/2011/08/08/joseph-and-family-values/

able to worship, work, and live in this place. We confess the ongoing bias, genocide, violence, and discrimination against our indigenous siblings. And we commit to the ongoing work toward justice and the dismantling of the colonial structures we continue to inhabit and from which we benefit.

When we speak at the chapel or tell stories from the Hebrew or Greek Testaments, we tell them with an awareness of these original stewards of the land upon which we are speaking. How might Philip, Anthony, Edward, and Agnes, and countless others who have been affected by the structures of colonization hear the stories we tell? When we speak about things like forgiveness, can we do so carefully, and not casually, remembering all that actually has happened, acknowledging our complicity and privilege, and where possible, taking responsibility for recompense and repair?

Seven times? Seventy-seven times!

Jeff R. Johnson

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 24, 2023

Jonah 3:10–4:11
Psalm 145:1–8
Philippians 1:21–30
Matthew 20:1–16

Reflections on the Texts

Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz defended his wealth in an exchange with Senator Bernie Sanders with this bromide commonplace among the super-rich: Your [billionaire] moniker constantly is unfair, he told Sanders. Yes, I have billions of dollars. I earned it. No one gave it to me.[13] I deserve it!

Robert Reich, a public policy professor at Cal Berkeley, says that 728 billionaires now hold more wealth than half of American households. Wealth inequality is eating this country alive.[14]

Maybe the 727 others feel the same way as Schultz. They earned it. They deserve it. It's just the way the world works!

In our modern economic systems, some people have way too much. But a growing number of people have not enough. We read the gospel as if we had no money, and spend our money as if we knew nothing of the gospel.[15] But it speaks directly to this ever widening wealth gap.

In our gospel text for this Sunday, all those who work have what they need, not too much or too little, but enough. Everyone has enough.

The householder has a field, needs help with the work, negotiates with the workers a sustaining wage, hires more workers throughout the day, and pays each one a fair daily wage, enough for their families to survive for the coming week. Those lucky enough to be picked for work at the beginning receive enough as do the last as well. They all get the same daily wage. They all earn enough for themselves and their families to live another week.

There is nothing easy about the ancient economic system in Roman occupied Palestine. Wealth is overly concentrated in the hands of a few. Landlords rely heavily on slavery and conscription for the labor they require. There is widespread poverty and deprivation. Our householder may be something of an anomaly in this system as there are none of these complicating factors visible in this story. There is no reference here to his unscrupulousness, to an exploitation wage, or to the laziness of the workers.

Professor Amy Jill Levine writes that this is a parable about a householder for whom we have no evidence of a Mafioso backstory; he is a householder, not Don Corleone.[16] He is neither skinflint nor capricious. The workers are also not lazy, but simply available throughout the day. And the wage is not exploitative. It is a usual daily wage, most likely enough to sustain a family for about a week. The point of the story seems to be that there is enough.

The story appears to be about the practice of generosity. The householder gives to everyone what they need to survive, instead of holding back on the daily wage for those who worked later in the day.

What would it be like if our real world were like this, where everyone has what they need? Imagine, suggests Jesus! What would it be like if God were like this? Imagine!

In our text from the Hebrew scriptures, Jonah, like the grumbling workers, has no time for such a generous God! To Jonah's dismay, the people of Nineveh escape without punishment. Sure, they repent. But Jonah has always suspected God to have had other plans. A divine calamitous visitation, while promised, was never really in the cards.

After all, God is fundamentally gracious, at least according to the Psalms. Full of grace and a mother's love is the ***Mother of All***, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love.[17]

13. https://www.forbes.com/sites/saradorn/2023/03/29/starbucks-ceo-schultz-defends-billionaire-status-in-heated-exchange-with-bernie-sanders-i-earned-it/?sh=32364dfb6767
14. https://web.archive.org/web/20230411215138/https://twitter.com/RBReich/status/1645208218954498052
15. https://sojo.net/magazine/may-june-1998/god-speed-year-jubilee?action=magazine.article&issue=soj9805&article=980520
16. Amy-Jill Levine. *Short Stories by Jesus* (HarperCollins, 2014), 224.
17. Gafney, *A Women's Lectionary*, 319.

Had there been no sackcloth and ashes, Jonah suspects that this ***Mother of All*** God would have found another way to capitulate to the promised destruction of Nineveh. All along suspecting God's graciousness, justified Jonah feels the fool. He so wanted apocalyptic fireworks. Now he feels like such a sucker!

The texts this Sunday speak to what we need, what we earn, and what we think we deserve. For ourselves and for our neighbors. What should our living look like, given the abundance of mercy at the center of God's heart?

A few years ago, when I was going through candidacy for rostered ministry in my denomination, the Bishop told us to pay attention to the rules of the church, but to pay greater attention to the rule of Christ—how we lived life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. By which, of course, he meant mercy. The gospel of Christ is rooted in God's mercy and abundant loving kindness. Generosity is one way to live life in a manner worthy of this bountiful source of unconditional love. Not because any of us have earned it. But because we all need it and deserve it!

Jeff R. Johnson