

# Preaching Helps

## Fourth Sunday after Pentecost — Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost Are Vacation Days Considered “Ordinary Time”?

I have discovered that summer begins earlier in Minneapolis than it did in New York City. This has nothing to do with sunrise and sunset but with school schedules and psychology. New York public schools go until almost the end of June (whether students are learning anything in the heat of summer or not!). But in Minnesota the school year starts a bit earlier and is over by the beginning of June. Whether or not you have children in school, psychologically June is the beginning of summer—and the end of adult forums, Sunday school, choir practice, and circle meetings in many congregations. Summer worship can feel like a downer with many people away on vacation (or simply on vacation from worship!). Whether we’re in the Midwest with summer a month old or in eastern cities like New York where it’s just starting, we’ve been living in “Ordinary Time” since June 18.

How can preaching in summer, especially in July and August, be different from the rest of the year? Perhaps the rhythms of summer offer new possibilities for worship and preaching to be extraordinary. The first Sunday in July is close to Independence Day celebrations in the U.S. The Gospel reading for that Sunday is from Matthew 10: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” How will Jesus’ words sound on July 2? What will be happening with immigration and deportations? Some congregations may worship outdoors in the summer, a good setting for the wonderful nature parables coming up in the last half of July. What would it be like to sit on the grass as we hear about Jesus feeding 5000 men—besides women and children—on August 6?

The Second Readings—often neglected—offer a chance to preach a sermon series. For example, you might preach a series on Romans Chapter 8 on July 16, 23, and 30. Perhaps you could conclude such a series with a letter you imagine Paul writing to the congregation you serve. Those same three July Sundays include Gospel readings from Matthew 13 offering wonderful possibilities to talk about parables and why Jesus told them.

Anticipate September: school starts in late August or after Labor Day in most places; college students leave home again; crops are turning brownish-yellow signaling that harvest is not far off; and many congregational programs will resume

after a summer break. How do September readings connect with what’s happening on the wall calendar? “Ordinary Time” continues through the end of November and the October issue of Preaching Helps will take us to the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation.

We welcome familiar friends and new writers to this issue of Preaching Helps. **Paul Baillie** is pastor of Iglesia Luterana San Lucas in Eagle Pass, Texas, a Spanish-speaking congregation of the ELCA near the United States-Mexico border. A graduate of Augustana College and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC), he interned at Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Manhattan and previously served Amazing Grace Lutheran Church in suburban San Antonio. In 2016, Paul received the Emerging Voice Award from his alma mater LSTC. **Catherine Malotky** is Director of Development at Luther Seminary. She earned an MA in theater from Northwestern and the M.Div. from Luther Seminary. Catherine has served congregations in inner city Minneapolis and rural southwestern Minnesota, sharing a call with her spouse, David Engelstad. In addition to her regular column, “Amen,” in the magazine *Gather*, she edited the e-book, *How Much is Enough—A Deeper Look at Stewardship in an Age of Abundance*. She authored the “Genesis” Bible study for *The Book of Faith* series. She and David give thanks for their grown daughters and are grateful their grandchildren live close by. **Andrea Roske-Metcalf** serves as the associate pastor at Grace Lutheran Church in Apple Valley, Minnesota. A graduate of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, she cares deeply about the power of liturgy and ritual to story communities of faith, and about the place of children in those communities. She is a two-time Moth Story SLAM champion and lives in Minneapolis with her husband, Luke, and their daughters, Clem and Oli. **John Rollefson** is a familiar friend in these pages. An ELCA pastor, he has served urban and campus ministries in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, and Los Angeles, plus interims in Solvang and London. John’s book *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A* was published in 2016 and we look forward to *Postils for Year B* coming soon. John and his wife, Ruth, live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church.

Barbara Lundblad  
Editor, Preaching Helps

## Fourth Sunday after Pentecost July 2, 1017

**Jeremiah 28:5–9**

**Psalms 89:1–4, 15–18**

**Romans 6:12–23**

**Matthew 10:40–42**

### Engaging the Texts

When the social order is re-ordering, people get anxious. Jeremiah writes in the midst of major upheaval. He prophesied a fall from grace for a chosen people, people whose self-identity was built on God's favor expressed through land, fame, and progeny. When the Babylonian empire's menacing shadow was looming, it shouldn't be a surprise that people didn't know who to trust. True prophet? False prophet? A little political drama to magnetize the proclamation? Yes, please. Hananiah, who hearkened from Gideon, historically in conflict with the chosen people, promoted a vision of victory and conquest. Jerusalem would survive and triumph. Jeremiah had no such optimism.

Why wouldn't the people find Hananiah's word attractive? If they believed in the word he brought they would not have to relinquish any of their long-held beliefs. They could be who they always thought they were—God's chosen. The text, however, reveals that Jeremiah's vision of their future would prevail, in spite of Hananiah's assault (he broke Jeremiah's yoke in front of everyone). Jeremiah's word of defeat and exile was the true prophesy. Is that good news or bad news?

The Roman congregation was in very different circumstances, but they also were trying to discern the right way to be faithful. Paul was contrasting their lives under the law with living under grace. The law was so much clearer, measurable, and familiar. Paul needed to help the congregation to understand the behavioral results of following Jesus in a life of grace. Ironically, he uses the metaphor of slavery, suggesting that we should be slaves of righteousness. Get your north star right, he seems to say. What's defining you? The law (and sin) or grace (and righteousness)?

In Matthew's Gospel text Jesus is working with a similar question. To what are you dedicated? What is your ground, the source that animates you and your life? Previous to these verses, Jesus has been laying bare the consequences of following him and he doesn't flinch from laying out the truth. The apostles received Jesus' authority, and he suggests they also will receive some of what he has and will experience—persecution, estrangement, denigration. It's not a pretty picture. He also suggests, as did Jeremiah, that in the end, salvation will come, "none will lose their reward."

### Pastoral Reflection

These are difficult texts. How can we know the true prophet from the false, particularly when our souls yearn for peace and security, and our shadow sides long for revenge and reward? Would you choose Hananiah's vision of victory or Jeremiah's vision of defeat? Could we even see the redemption to come, a spiritually healthier us after being healed from the tumult? Similarly, can we honestly say that we are willing to follow Jesus if it means the unpleasantness he predicts in the passage immediately before today's text? (10:34–39) Wouldn't it be nicer to figure out the formula for being faithful and then just focus on that? Keep our noses clean and hope everyone else chooses to follow along too?

When social orders are up-ending, people get anxious, and anxious people tend to be short-sighted and particularly focused on their own well-being. In Jeremiah's world, the Babylonian threat was not simply exile to a foreign land, but a challenge to a self-definition, to an identity as God's chosen. What would be true if the covenant that shaped their sense of worth as God's favored ones was stripped of its power to shape and inspire? What if everything they had believed about themselves for generations wasn't true? If Jerusalem fell, who would they be? Just another Semitic tribe like any other?

We are not that far away from this kind of theological and spiritual identity crisis. We Americans have understood ourselves culturally to be bootstrap kind of people. When things get tough, we get going. Or we move west. Or we homestead. Or we work harder. Or we find a new partner. Or? Or? But what if we must come to terms with a globalized world, a climate that's changing, a shift in systemic privilege, a multi-religious world? Can we be clear about what animates us? Is it Jesus who welcomed the immigrant, those who were left out of the prevailing economic system, and those whose gender/sexuality or class/race were not his own? What if that means standing against the tide, family drama, loss of standing, and less economic advantage? Might we not prefer to listen to other prophets who suggest that we can get back to the good old days, especially if we benefited in those good old days? How can we clear our anxious minds and hearts and see a future through the eyes of a God who welcomes everyone?

*Catherine Malotky*

## Fifth Sunday after Pentecost July 9, 2017

**Zechariah 9:9–12**

**Psalm 145:8–14**

**Romans 7:15–25a**

**Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30**

### Engaging the Texts

As Christians, we might expect that the Gospel reading would be the Palm Sunday story to line up with the first reading from Zechariah. But the words of Zechariah have their own integrity that precedes the look back from Jesus' day. Once again, we are invited into the theological struggle of a chosen people who have lost everything, hoping to find new ways of telling their story so they will not be separated forever from God's presence. Zechariah's oracle (ch. 9) of redemption sees God at work in both the Southern kingdom (Zion and Jerusalem) post Babylonian exile and the Northern kingdom (Ephraim) that had fallen even earlier to the Assyrians. The traditional understanding of God's role as protector of Jerusalem and her king has a new twist. Clearly, there must be a twist, since the city had not only fallen to the Babylonians, but had been destroyed, including the temple. Given the traditional understanding of God's role, where was God the protector? So in Zechariah the new king returns, not in power and glory, but humbly, on a donkey. Note in verse 12, "prisoners of hope." Hope is not usually seen as imprisoning, unless your hope is based on the wrong vision. With the wrong vision, you could miss seeing the reality of God's presence now.

In Romans 7 we eavesdrop on Paul's confession and acknowledgement of his powerlessness over the sin that inhabits him. He personifies sin as he works this out, and dualistically locates sin in his flesh and rationality in his mind. Why would he do what he does not want to do? Any of us could wonder the same. And it's important to see that his concern is with sin, not sins. There is something deeper here, not just a few poor choices made in a few weak moments.

The Gospel text brings these two together. If our vision is that we can be perfect, we will miss what's important now. Matthew presents Jesus' weariness, even impatience, with our inability to know or see God at work. In the context of questions about his cousin, John the Baptist, Jesus points out that people have rejected both John's message and Jesus'. The pericope skips verses in which Jesus calls out three cities for their unrepentance, two of which have been the location of significant healings and miracles. "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." Pay attention to the outcomes, Jesus offers. And then

he notes that the revelation is not to the wise (in this case, religious leaders of the day?), but to the infants, the simple-minded. Finally, the familiar, "Come to me, all you who are weary...and I will give you rest."

### Pastoral Reflection

"Be careful of what you hope for." How can we discern God's presence among us? This is particularly challenging in times of change. Recall the days when language was constituent of congregational identity. For an immigrant people, being able to worship in your native tongue was a kind of gospel in itself. And it was likely that folks who spoke your language also understood your ways, your food, and your memories. Yet, once past the first or second generation, the struggle began. We served a congregation that spent thirty years transitioning from German to English, as measured by the first student confirmed in English to the last confirmed in German. Now, in a far more diverse world, we must wonder whether the cultural distinctions we may still treasure exclude more than they welcome. Are we sending the right message? Are the things that have been so meaningful in the past helping the next generation of faithful ones see God at work in our world and their lives?

What about the pipe organ and the liturgy and dressing up for worship and even Sunday as the day? If we define our faith as our parents and grandparents did, if those are the visions of health and vitality that inspire us, might we miss a different vitality that is before us? What might a multicultural congregation look like? What if tacos were as valued as casserole? What if fry bread was communion fare? What if we wondered how much we were missing by being so homogenous?

Might our own commitment to sophistication be making us "prisoners of hope" or blinding us to the radial welcome of the gospel? Might we be the "wise" who are missing the point, and therefore missing opportunities to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, comfort the sick, and visit the prisoner? Pay attention to the outcomes, Jesus suggests. Are we, as communities of faith, making the world a better place? Or are we mostly fixated on recreating the glory days as we remember them?

And do we tire even thinking of all this? In the Gospel reading Jesus invites us back, even we who so often miss the point of his welcome. Even we, the "wise" and clueless, are invited to take on his yoke of love and action on behalf of all. Keep it simple. Stay focused on Jesus and the life of love.

*Catherine Malotky*

## Sixth Sunday after Pentecost July 16, 2017

**Isaiah 55:10–13**

**Psalms 65: [1-8], 9–13**

**Romans 8:1–11**

**Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23**

### Engaging the Texts

Today marks the beginning of a three-week journey in Romans 8. Preachers might decide to preach a sermon series on this very rich chapter: God's Spirit bearing witness with our spirit, creation groaning in labor pains, and the bold promise that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus. Preaching on the epistles is most effective when the preacher has time to work with the letter more than once. Encourage people to include Romans 8 in their summertime reading, July 16–30. This chapter is surely worth three sermons.

Both Isaiah and Matthew celebrate the power of God's word, sown with abandon and accomplishing God's purposes as surely as rain and snow fall from heaven. Isaiah 55 is the conclusion to what we now call "Second Isaiah." Chapters 40–55 presuppose an Israelite audience living in Babylon toward the end of the Babylonian exile. While dependent on First Isaiah's message, these chapters speak consolation rather than judgment, beginning with the promise, "Comfort, O comfort my people...Speak tenderly to Jerusalem." (40:1, 2) God's promise will prevail, even in the midst of exile. "[My word] shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." (55:11) The English translation "which I purpose" often throws off readers (and hearers). We're tempted to say "which I propose" but that's not the meaning here. Stumbling over "purpose" as a verb could be a sermon itself! God's word doesn't simply propose something but actually causes something to happen.

With Isaiah's promise in our ears, we hear Jesus' parable about a sower who tossed seed every-which-way: on the path, on rocky ground, and among thorns. Finally, some seed fell on good soil, seemingly by accident. This parable is closer to allegory than Jesus' other parables. Each part stands for something and Jesus explains what each part means after the comma in today's text. In verses 18–23, Jesus says the seed is the word of God, but he never identifies the sower! (Can we assume the sower is Jesus?) Then he identifies each type of soil. Path People hear the word but fail to understand and the evil one easily snatches the word away. Rocky Ground People respond quickly, but their roots are shallow. When temptations or persecutions come, they fall away. And the Thorny Ground People? They hear and may even respond to God's word, but lots of other options come along. God's word is choked out

by the cares of this world and the lure of wealth. Thankfully, there are some Good Soil People. They hear and understand God's word, and live by it; that is, they bear fruit: "in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." The descending order of yield is intriguing. In Mark the seed that fell on good soil "...increased and yielded thirty and sixty and a hundredfold" (Mark 4:8). Perhaps Matthew, writing years after Mark, knew the reality that the harvest wouldn't always be bigger. This may be a word of deep assurance for faithful congregations that see their numbers growing smaller—"thirtyfold" is still an abundant harvest.

### Pastoral Reflection

Today and next Sunday, Jesus tells stories about bad farming. Next Sunday he'll tell his disciples to leave weeds in the field and not pull them up, lest the good plants are rooted out as well. In today's Gospel Jesus talks about a sower who scattered seed so randomly that most of the seed didn't have a chance to grow. Landing on good soil seemed almost an accident. My father was a farmer and he never would have done that. It was a waste of good seed. When he planted sweet corn, my job was to sit on the planter and yell, "Hey! The planter's clogged up!" whenever the seeds got stuck. Dad wanted to make sure all the seed got planted in the ground. Whenever I've read parables like this I've usually said, "Isn't it wonderful how Jesus used such down-to-earth stories and images? Sowers and sheep, bread dough and fishing nets—these images would certainly connect to the people of Galilee."

Then it struck me: these parables about haphazard sowing and letting weeds grow must have sounded completely ridiculous to people who knew about farming. While they were laughing, Jesus was upending their usual ways of thinking. Good soil? It's not where you'd expect! Jesus tells the religious leaders that "the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (Matt 21:31). Those who are truly good soil often don't realize it! This is clear in Jesus' last teaching session in Matthew. The ones who feed the hungry and clothe the naked are surprised to be blessed. "When did we see you hungry or thirsty?" they ask. Jesus answers, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (25:40).

Jesus' disciples often fit his descriptions of bad soil: they hear but fail to understand; they fall away when troubles come, one of them betrays him and another denies even knowing him. Yet, to these disciples Jesus entrusts the mission of God's kingdom (28:16–20). Even now, Jesus entrusts this mission to us. Don't worry about the percentage of yield. Don't predict where the seed will bring the best results. Keep sowing and be ready for surprises: God's word will not return empty.

*Barbara Lundblad*



## Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 23, 2017

Isaiah 44:6–8

Psalms 86:11–17

Romans 8:12–25

Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

### Engaging the Texts

There are paired comparisons and implied separations scattered throughout this day's readings like, well, seeds. From the LORD's imperative in Isaiah that we testify to the truth that there is "no god" but God; to the psalmist's plea for an undivided heart; to the opposing spirits of adoption and slavery in Paul's letter to the Romans; to the wheat and the weeds in Jesus' parable of the weeds found only in the Gospel of Matthew. Each of these dueling images serves to raise tension with the audience, challenging each of us to examine our own lives for "the first fruits of the Spirit" (Rom 8:23) that might indicate on which side of these dividing lines we stand.

Yet, paired with these anxiety-invoking images are words of comfort and promise. "Do not fear, or be afraid" (Isa 44:8); "You, O LORD, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Ps 86:15); "we are children of God" (Rom 8:16); and "let both of them grow together until the harvest" (Matt 13:30). Because the final words left ringing in the ears of the assembly before the sermon will include, "they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth," (Matt 13:41–42) it will be important that preachers be sure to set that image in its proper context in light of these other words of assurance.

In the reading from Matthew's gospel, the lectionary leaves out verses 31–32 (the parable of the mustard seed) and 33–35 (the parable of yeast mixed with flour). Those parables, along with others, will be read in worship the following week (Pentecost 8) and also feature images of growth in which something small or subsumed grows to serve and save the whole. In fact, next week's Gospel text is so dependent on this week's text that a forward-thinking preacher might choose to intentionally craft a two-part sermon beginning this week and ending next Sunday.

While skipping those parables on this day allows assemblies to consider them at greater length later, it also unintentionally aligns the listeners with the disciples who rejoin the narrative at verse 36 to ask Jesus to go back to the troubling parable of the weeds of the field. We might wonder whether or not they had even heard the subsequent parables, or instead remained stuck in the picture of wheat and tares grow-

ing side by side, indistinguishable from one another, as their own community continued to attract new followers and drew the attention of the religious authorities.

### Pastoral Reflection

Many will find it difficult to focus on anything other than the image of the weeds—collected, bundled, and thrown into the fire. In all likelihood, that is the image that will have taken root in listeners' minds as you approach the pulpit this morning. While it might be tempting to dwell on the image of those burning weeds, the heart of this passage is the householder's show of restraint, rejecting the slaves' suggestion that they go and uproot the undesirables in their midst.

I suspect that some hearers will get stuck in the violence of the eschatological imagery of weeds cast into the fire, especially when the explanation of the parable Jesus gives makes it explicit that the weeds are "children of the evil one" (Matt 13:38). I wonder if the strength of our resistance to this image derives from the fact that it is offered by Jesus. Elsewhere, in the psalms for example, readers seem more open to accepting violent images (such as the oft-quoted Ps 137:9, "Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks"). Rather than interpret these passages as evidence of divine warrant for violence, we might accept them as honest portrayals of the strength of our emotions and the powerful urges we have to judge, condemn, and reject one another.

This parable addresses that very real experience of judgment and division in human relationships. Rather than avoid the power of that imagery, preachers might examine their own biographies or the history of the congregation to find episodes that reveal the truth of our own desire to uproot and discard those we cannot accept or abide. It is precisely by helping the assembly to identify with the real and understandable impulse of the householder's slaves to tear out the weeds that the preacher will be able to deliver the challenge of this Gospel reading: the long awaited day of justice will come, but on that day it will be the angels who will do the reaping; i.e., it will *never* be our place to decide who is and who is not a weed in the LORD's fields.

For those who might hear this prohibition as unbearable, the preacher has the opportunity to share stories of those times when prolonged conflict yielded a better result. Or times when persistent opposition prevented a well-intentioned but poorly thought out idea from arriving at an unfortunate outcome. The truth is, each of us has likely been perceived as the weed in someone else's life. Therefore, the watchword for this day is patience (Rom 8:25), which is the ground in which hope has the best chance to grow.

*Erik Christensen*

## Eighth Sunday after Pentecost July 30, 2017

**1 Kings 3:5–12**

**Psalms 119:129–136**

**Romans 8:26–39**

**Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52**

### Engaging the Texts

This week's texts continue to provoke our imagination about the "kingdom of heaven" with all the craft of a master Wisdom teacher. The Gospel offers parable after parable that subvert expectations about who and what is good in ways that relate directly back to the central image of wheat and weeds in the previous week's Gospel (Pentecost 7). In fact, the connections between the two lections cannot be ignored and suggest a two-part sermon spanning both weeks.

Following on the Parable of the Weeds, in which weeds are evidence of the Devil's intentional efforts at sabotage, Jesus' Parable of the Mustard Seed presents a plant (the mustard shrub) that was viewed as a weed yet becomes a home for God's creation. Then, again, with the Parable of Yeast, a suspect and corrupt substance is revealed to be the agent by which God brings about the kingdom. It is after this parable that the lectionary breaks the flow of Matthew's gospel, as it is at this point that the disciples ask for an explanation to the Parable of the Weeds.

Having provided an explanation that assigns to God alone the work of judgment, Jesus continues with a new series of images that challenge the conventional "respectability politics" of the day. The kingdom of heaven is likened to a thief's reward, then a merchant's prize (merchants were not held in high esteem). The sequence of these parables cannot be accidental. Jesus strings together metaphor after metaphor like pearls on a strand in such a way that the impact of the whole series exceeds the meaning of any one parable. The kingdom of God uses that which the world disregards and despises to bring into being what is truly needed: an abundant harvest, a spacious home, a wholesome loaf. These metaphors of the reign of God beg us to ask ourselves what we might give up to participate in such a reality.

The other texts for this day serve to support this dawning realization. In King Solomon we encounter another wisdom teacher and an explanation for why it is that we struggle to embrace God's counter-cultural wisdom ("no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you" 1 Kings 3:12). In Romans we hear assurance that despite our own weakness (Rom 8:26), there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can separate us from God's all-encompassing love—certainly not our own misguided efforts to discern who

among us is good or evil. As if responding the Parable of the Weeds or the Dragnet, Paul cries out with relief, "Who is to condemn?" (v. 34).

### Pastoral Reflection

This series of parables about the "kingdom of heaven" is intended to teach Jesus' followers to interrogate their assumptions about who belongs in the community of the faithful and how they are to treat one another as they live in anticipation of God's future reign. By interrupting the series of parables with the disciples' request for an explanation, the Gospel of Matthew subtly introduces anthropological questions to this eschatological discourse. While Jesus is ostensibly describing God's preferred future, he is also addressing the very human desire to categorize, condemn, and segregate ourselves from one another.

What unconventional images might you propose to the assembly gathered for worship on this day to challenge their notions of who is acceptable and what can be tolerated in the fellowship of the faithful? What are the habits and practices that have taken hold of people in your community that keep them from recognizing and trusting that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39)?

While the original setting for Matthew's gospel would have been grappling with sociological concerns about who and what is in or out, modern minds are conditioned to listen for psychological interpretations of these texts. For preachers who are inclined to speak into that frame, it would be good to complicate interpretations of these parables of separation that suggest that some aspects of our psyches or personalities are good and saved, while others are destined for destruction along the eschatological horizon. While our culture of self-improvement may incline people to view themselves as a series of problems to be solved and deficits to be improved upon, these parables suggest that we may not know what elements of our God-created selves will ultimately leaven the loaf and lift the whole.

The challenge of preaching these two weeks in sequence will be to hold the tensions and divisions created by these parables of the kingdom, while still proclaiming an unambiguous word of divine, inseparable love. Where those dynamics seem irreconcilable we are reminded that God's wisdom, thankfully, exceeds our own.

*Erik Christensen*

## Ninth Sunday after Pentecost August 6, 2017

Isaiah 55:1–5

Psalms 145:8–9, 14–21

Romans 9:1–5

Matthew 14:13–21

### Engaging the Texts

At first glance, it's nearly impossible to miss the strong theme of justice and provision for those who have little that is woven throughout these texts, particularly when it comes to food. Isaiah invites those who have no money to “come, buy and eat” (55:1). The psalmist sings of the Lord giving everyone “their food in due season” (145:15) and “satisfying the desire of every living thing” (145:16). And in Matthew we have perhaps the most well-known story about the provision of food, in the feeding of the five thousand.

But issues of justice, as we know, are never merely one-dimensional, and these readings provide for deeper reflection, if we pay enough attention. Isaiah isn't simply calling on those with no money to be fed; but rather to “eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food” (55:2). He's not going to settle for a soggy grilled cheese sandwich in line at the soup kitchen. He's speaking a word against urban food deserts. The psalmist states that “the Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy” (145:20). Who *are* the wicked ones, especially in these questions of hunger and excess, or of scarcity and abundance? How will we know if we are among them? And if we discover that we are, how will we respond? Defensively? By declaring it can't possibly be so? By sticking our heads in the sand? Or by listening to and learning from those whose voices have been silenced, and leveraging our privilege on their behalf?

Then in Matthew, the story ends with that ridiculous statistic in verse 21: “And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.” We still refer to this story as “The Feeding of the Five Thousand,” even though those 5,000 men were almost certainly fewer than half the people present that day. Did the gospel writer not realize that an accurate head count would have made this miracle sound even more miraculous? Five loaves and two fish to feed 5,000 people is pretty impressive, but five loaves and two fish for 20,000 people? That's another league of miracles altogether. It seems almost irresponsible not to at least acknowledge this erasure, given that it's the very last thing people will hear before we declare, “This is the Gospel of the Lord!”

### Pastoral Reflection

I wonder if the writers of any of these texts even imagined that we'd still be talking about these issues today—whether

people without money should be able to eat (and whether their food should be good); whether women and children should be counted, or should simply *count*.

And yet, here we are, engaged in local and national and global conversations about budgets and school meals and healthcare eligibility and women's reproductive rights. What was it the psalmist was singing about again?

I'm struck, suddenly, by what the disciples say to Jesus when they suggest that he send the crowds away: “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late” (14:15). It wasn't just that they had no food; it was that they had somehow managed to find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time, like they got caught at a stoplight and quickly moved to lock the car doors.

But there were literally *thousands of people* gathered in that place. That makes it the opposite of deserted, but how often do we make this same mistake? How often do we go to a crowded place—be it a mall or a sports arena or a worship service—and pretend like no one else is there, avoiding eye contact with everyone around us?

It has been suggested by some scholars that what actually happened in that place is that everyone reached into their bags or cloaks and brought out whatever bits of food they had along with them. This understanding is often met with push-back, but in my mind it might be a more miraculous miracle. If that was what happened, it never would have worked had they all gone their separate ways. It only worked because they all stayed together, one big motley community, finding themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time with more than enough to go around.

That is the Kingdom, right there. That is what God promises to us, if we could only recognize the part we are invited to play. That invitation exists, in different ways, in every single context—the invitation to step into a space that might make you uncomfortable; the invitation to recognize what it is you *do* have to contribute to the greater good, even if it never seemed like much; the invitation to ensure not just that everyone has enough, but that everyone has enough in abundance. That invitation exists in every single context. I wonder what it would sound like in yours?

*Andrea Roske-Metcalf*

## Tenth Sunday after Pentecost August 13, 2017

**1 Kings 19:9–18**

**Psalm 85:8–13**

**Romans 10:5–15**

**Matthew 14:22–33**

### Engaging the Texts

All four of the assigned texts for this week touch on faithfulness, righteousness, justification, belief. In 1 Kings, the Lord promises Elijah to leave “seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him” (19:18). From the psalmist we hear that God’s salvation “is at hand for those who fear him” (85:9). In Romans, Paul writes of confessing with our lips and believing in our hearts that Jesus is Lord (10:9), and praises those who bring good news (10:15).

Then we get to Matthew’s gospel, where Jesus and Peter walk on water. It occurs to me that if I went to church and discovered that this was the Gospel reading, I would fully expect to hear a sermon about Jesus’ love, care, and salvation for us, even in the face of our doubts, or about how much more we could accomplish, if only we didn’t give in to our doubts so often. Regardless of the angle, I would expect the takeaway to be that faith = good, and doubts = bad.

And as I sit here, having just finished another year of teaching confirmation, I’m quite certain that’s not the only way to look at it. What if the tone Jesus takes with Peter in saying, “You of little faith, why do you doubt?” (14:31) isn’t one of chastisement, or even loving resignation, but rather one of eager wonder? What if Jesus was just as likely to ask this question if they had been waiting in line for popcorn at the fair, or at the celebration of someone’s wedding?

What if we’re *all* of little faith, and we *all* doubt, and Jesus simply wants to know more about who we are, and what makes us tick; what we are afraid of and what it is that brings us great joy?

I mean, *aren’t* we of little faith? Aren’t *you*? I know *I* am, most days. Maybe I’m not supposed to say that out loud. But let’s face it—Peter is the only one of the disciples who even dares to step out of the boat. He certainly has more faith in that moment than any of the others, and yet Jesus says these words to him.

### Pastoral Reflection

I’m always bowled over by the resistance of my parishioners—old and young, new to the faith or not, and regardless of context—to being open about their doubts. When I preach about my own, they look around, like maybe they are missing something, or a camera crew is about to jump out and sur-

prise them. When I tell my confirmation kids that they don’t have to be confirmed if they don’t want to, and that I’ll go to bat for them with their parents if necessary, they always think I’m joking at first.

Our Sunday school culture all too often treats kids like empty buckets to be filled not by faith, necessarily, but by a certain set of beliefs. We assume the nuances will be taken care of later—in confirmation, or youth group, or adult education and Bible studies. An awful lot of people skip those parts, though, and even if they don’t, they still remember what they were taught in third grade, and they remember that one teacher (there’s always one, isn’t there?) who wasn’t willing to leave any room for doubts or questions.

But Jesus’ question to Peter is a freeing one, in my mind. He catches him first, to be clear. If Peter’s doubts are the cause of his sinking, they certainly won’t take him down, literally or figuratively. Jesus has already caught him, and it isn’t until after he catches Peter that he wants to know, “Why did you doubt?”

If Jesus asked me that question, I would have to respond, “How much time do you have?”

Maybe what our people need to hear this week isn’t a list of the virtues of faith, but rather an honest list of the reasons that any of us doubt, some that will likely apply to anyone and everyone, and some that only make sense in our particular places. Maybe we could invite them to think about their own doubts, or even to share them with the person sitting next to them. Maybe what our people need to hear this week is that their leaders, too, struggle with faith, and that we, too, have doubts.

This seems to me a sort of permission-giving, and it strikes me as one of the building blocks for authentic trust in community.

I could use more authentic community these days. Maybe we all could.

Either way, we don’t have anything to lose. After all, Jesus has already caught us.

*Andrea Roske-Mercalfe*

## Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost August 20, 2017

**Isaiah 56:1, 6–8**

**Psalm 67**

**Romans 11:1–2a, 29–32**

**Matthew 15: [10–20], 21–28**

### Engaging the Texts

The outsiders are insiders, whether we want them to be or not, even whether *Jesus* wants them to be or not. In Isaiah,



we have foreigners joining themselves to the Lord (56:6), who accepts their offerings and sacrifices and whose house is called a “house of prayer for all peoples” (56:7).

In Romans 11, God’s judgment and mercy are for all people. In Matthew 15, a lack of care and concern for the other is deemed as that which defiles a person, rather than failing to observe the customs of a specific group of people (15:10–20). Just following this teaching is the story of the Canaanite woman—an outsider—who has a thing or two to say to Jesus about his willingness to follow along regarding who’s in and who’s out.

This is my favorite story in all of scripture. This Canaanite woman (or the Syrophenician woman, if you’re reading from Mark) isn’t the only person in the Bible to tell Jesus he is wrong, but she is the only one to be right about it. And while that alone makes this story incredibly compelling, and while I hate to shift my focus away from the woman and back to the man (hello, every other story in the Bible!), the fact that Jesus is wrong here is also really important to me, as is the way he handles it.

We confess Jesus as both fully human and fully divine. Most of us, however, favor one or the other. Maybe it seems like preachers, especially, should favor the divine, but it’s the human side of the God-made-flesh that intrigues me the most. Jesus is super-human here, but not in a super-hero kind of way. He’s super-human in that he super-screws-up. The Canaanite woman asks for healing for her daughter, and because she is not of “the house of Israel” Jesus replies, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” He calls this woman a dog, if we’re generous, and a bitch, if we’re paying closer attention.

I get it; he is tired. He just wants to be left alone; that is why he left the crowds and went to the place where the woman found him. He has had it up to here with all the people needing him to take care of All The Things. How many of us (especially those of us in leadership positions) haven’t felt the same way?

But the Canaanite woman knows he is better than that. She gives him enough credit not to let him off the hook. Her daughter is possessed by a demon; she has nothing left to lose. She could just slink away; that would probably be the more socially acceptable response. She could get angry; no one would blame her after the insult Jesus just lobbed her way. But instead she is savvy. She takes that insult and turns it back in on itself. “Yes, Lord,” she says, “yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

She knows what Jesus is capable of, and she knows her daughter doesn’t need much of it. All she is asking for is scraps. Heck, she’s a woman in an uber-patriarchal society, mothering a girl-child. Scraps are her currency.

The strength of this woman’s response is mind-blowing.

And equally mind-blowing, especially now, given how deeply divided we are as a country and society, is the response that Jesus gives her.

He hears her. He realizes she is right. He changes his mind.

He doesn’t say, “Well, actually...” He doesn’t give her a history lesson. He doesn’t put her in her place. He doesn’t dismiss her.

He hears her, and he changes his mind. And in doing so, her daughter is healed.

### Pastoral Reflection

Political and theological fundamentalism—both progressive *and* conservative—seem to have reached all-time highs, with little evidence that this will change anytime soon. While it may seem more difficult to preach in a faith community whose membership is a pretty mixed bag, those that don’t run the risk of turning into echo chambers; either way, the time is ripe for conversations about what it means to recognize those who think or believe differently from us as created in God’s image, as well.

That said we also need to take care not to make the case for unity simply for the sake of unity, when actual lives are at stake, which they are.

What we need most (and I think Jesus helps us to remember here, in his interaction with the Canaanite woman) is to exercise the part of our brain that opens us up to new ideas, new understandings, and most importantly, to the possibility that our imaginations (even our progressive imaginations!) are stunted when it comes to who’s in and who’s out, which ones are the saviors and which are the saved, and whether our actions even begin to line up with our intentions.

And we need to exercise the part of our brains that would allow us to engage with those different from us with the deftness of the Canaanite woman, whose integrity caught Jesus so off-guard that all he could do was think, “Huh. I suppose maybe she’s right. In fact, clearly, she’s right.”

These are hard things. To engage with another in the way that these two engaged with each other is asking a lot.

My worship professor at Union Theological Seminary, Dr. Janet Walton says, “We worship in order to rehearse the realm of God.” We have to find a way to rehearse this kind of vulnerable engagement, in the safety of our own worshipping communities, if we are to have any hope of being good at it out in the world.

*Andrea Roske-Metcalf*

## Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost August 27, 2017

Isaiah 51:1–6

Psalm 138

Romans 12:1–8

Matthew 16:13–20

### ROCKY

... your steadfast love, O Lord, endures for ever.

—Psalm 138:8b

Opinion polls have a biblical origin, it seems, as our Gospel reading opens with Jesus posing a question to his disciples: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Opinions vary, his disciples report. “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Some sort of prophet seems to have been the general consensus. “But who do you say that I am?” (16:13–15) Jesus asks, turning from a request for mere reportage to an avowal of personal commitment.

Should we be surprised that it’s Simon who steps forward to utter the words that together with the following story of the transfiguration serve as a kind of hinge in Matthew’s gospel? For here Jesus in effect turns his face to Jerusalem and the destiny that he senses awaits him there. “You are the Messiah,” Simon confesses, “the son of the living God” (16:16)—a christological high point in Matthew’s gospel concerning which Jesus urges secrecy upon his disciples.

But Jesus first will bless Simon for his confessional outburst while at the same time claiming that this wasn’t really a matter of Simon’s own doing but God’s: “flesh and blood have not revealed this to you.” Then follow Jesus’ words not found in the other synoptics that have bedeviled the church through the ages: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” This is followed by words about his being given “the keys to the kingdom of heaven” from which originates subsequent Christian art’s identification of Peter as the guy with the keys, numerous bad jokes depicting Peter as the guy who meets folks at heaven’s pearly gates, and his being endowed with authority for “binding and loosing” to which we’ll return in our Gospel reading in a couple of weeks.

The pun on Simon’s new name in the original Greek, of course, is intended. While “church,” as *ekklesia* is here translated, does seem to be an anachronistic intrusion from Matthew’s day into Jesus’ words, the wordplay regarding Jesus’ nicknaming of Simon long has seemed to me characteristic of Jesus’ own ironic sense of humor. “*Petra*,” the Greek word for “rock”—and our First Reading from Isaiah which speaks

of “the rock from which you were hewn” seems specially chosen to suggest that Peter might be considered something of a “chip off the old block” of Father Abraham and Mother Sarah—here becomes the “quarry” or source of Jesus’ nickname “Petros” which scholars tell us wasn’t at all a name before Jesus’ time. It’s a snide moniker Jesus fastens on his impetuous, quick-silver disciple who will fail miserably to live up to his name in Jesus’ coming time of trial and might more aptly have been named “Sandy” than “Rocky.” The early tradition of the church in which Peter will eventually be martyred in Rome where he had become the originating *episkopos*, sees today’s Gospel as its authenticating link. But some will remember how self-consciously Protestant interpreters went to convoluted lengths to insist that the “rock” to which Jesus refers was really the foundation stone of faith alone, Peter’s own God-given confession of Jesus as Lord. See Grundtvig’s classic hymn, “Built on a Rock the Church Shall Stand” (ELW #652) as a memorable example.

Rather than the rock imagery of Isaiah and Matthew for the *ekklesia* of the faithful, Paul invokes the organic image of the body, which he had previously used to good effect in his Corinthian correspondence. He begins by urging the church situated at the heart of the empire to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (12:1). Life as worship, *ora et labora* as the Benedictines like to put it, is a fruitful way of viewing our daily baptismal calling. Formed by *leitourgia* in our public work of gathering as *ekklesia*, we then scatter to perform our daily vocation of faith active in love, our *diakonia*, as the church sent out “before the gods” of the everyday world, as the psalmist sings (138:1). This way of doing worship “somatically” results in ways of believing and behaving, of thinking and doing, that are not “conformed” to this world but are “transformed” or, in Greek, “metamorphosized”—the same verb Matthew will use of Jesus on the mountaintop which we translate as “transfigured.”

Flannery O’Connor once said in paraphrase of Jesus’ words in John, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.” The odd, eccentric, foolish character of the church’s calling into the world is a matter, I’m afraid, to which we pay insufficient attention in our well-meaning efforts to be evangelically appealing and missionally successful in a manner acceptable to church management gurus captive to strategies of entrepreneurial spirituality. Paul’s promise is that we’ll find within the church, “the one body of Christ,” all the gifts we need including such wide-ranging charismata as prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and being compassionate. These “gifts that differ according to the grace given to us” are found distributed through the members of the “body of Christ.” They are to function as continual reminders that the non-conforming, transforming behaviors

of the church necessarily bear a family resemblance to Jesus' own way of being in the world—the original, now resurrected “body of Christ.”

*John Rollefson*

## Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 3, 2017

**Jeremiah 15:15–21**

**Psalms 26:1–8**

**Romans 12:9–21**

**Matthew 16:21–28**

*Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind.  
For your steadfast love is before my eyes,  
and I walk in faithfulness to you.  
—Psalm 26:2–3*

### VOCATION

Just as summer vacations are winding down and folks are resuming their ordinary routines of work and school, today's Gospel text heard in the context of our secular Labor Day holiday provides plenty of encouragement to reflect on our shared sense of Christian vocation. This is a theme well worth pondering in this 500th anniversary of Luther's reformation. Fred Pratt Green's hymn, “How Clear is Our Vocation, Lord” (ELW #580) is a rare hymn on the topic of our Christian calling, set to a familiar tune. Jesus' words following Peter's confession and rebuke, together with Jeremiah's fraught and painful calling as God's prophet, Paul's words of good counsel regarding behaviors befitting those called to discipleship in the very heart of the empire, and the psalmist's reassuring us of the steadfastness of God's love, taken together challenge us to reflect on the nature of our vocation as Jesus' cross-bearing followers and the cost of such discipleship: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (16:25). The newly nicknamed Peter's rebuke of Jesus for speaking these words is sufficiently offensive that Jesus ironically consigns the future pope and gate-keeper of heaven to the precincts of hell with the words, “Get behind me, Satan!” (v 23).

The happy coincidence that the day of commemoration for Albert Schweitzer falls on September 4 (at least in LBW but why not in ELW?) makes this a good opportunity to hold before our congregations the life and witness of perhaps the best-known Lutheran of the last century. Already a celebrated author, philosopher, theologian, pastor, academic administrator, musicologist, and organist, at the age of 30, Schweitzer

began medical studies, as he explains in his autobiography, “that I might be able to work without having to talk. For years I had been giving myself out in words, and it was with joy that I had followed the calling of theological teacher and of preacher. But this new form of activity I could not represent to myself as talking about the religion of love, but only as an actual putting it into practice” (*Out of My Life and Thought* [New York: 1949], 77). And so, on Good Friday 1913, the newly graduated and licensed physician set out for French Equatorial Africa to become a missionary doctor for the remainder of his long life, one of noteworthy service eventually recognized and honored by the bestowal of the Nobel Peace Prize.

What turned Schweitzer's life from its already remarkable and distinguished academic and musical career path was an experience he'd had more than a decade earlier when at his parents' home for summer vacation in the Lutheran parsonage at Gunsbach in the Vosges Mountains near Strasbourg where his father served as pastor. Schweitzer later recounted how in his twenty-first year—then, as now, a time of vocational discerning—he was suddenly struck by the thought of how incomprehensible it was that he should be allowed to lead such a happy, care-free student's life while he saw about him so many people wrestling with care and suffering.

In his autobiography he remembered how

One brilliant summer morning there came to me as I awoke, the thought that I must not accept this happiness as a matter of course, but must give something in return for it. Proceeding to think the matter out at once with calm deliberation while the birds were singing outside, I settled with myself before I got up, that I would consider myself justified in living till I was 30 for science and art, in order to devote myself from that time forward to the direct service of humanity. Many a time I had tried to settle what meaning lay hidden for me in the saying of Jesus: “Whoever would save their life shall lose it, and whosoever shall lose their life for my sake and the Gospel's shall save it.” Now the answer was found. In addition to the *outward*, I now had *inward happiness* (122).

No longer a household name, Albert Schweitzer is worth commemorating in our churches as a saint who took to heart Jesus' call to cross-bearing discipleship marked by the kind of practical love that even (and maybe especially) the secular world would recognize and celebrate. It's also worth remembering that his theology and ethic of “reverence for life,” as he came to call it, were considered too “spacious” by many of his fellow Lutherans! “He Comes to Us as One Unknown” (ELW

#737) has long seemed to me a nice paraphrase of Schweitzer's famous concluding paragraph in his masterwork *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York, 1949), 403:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He came to those men (sic) who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands and to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

*John Rollefson*

## Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 10, 2017

**Ezekiel 33:7–11**

**Psalms 119:33–40**

**Romans 13:8–14**

**Matthew 18:15–20**

### Engaging the Texts

The lectionary planners chose to pair Ezekiel 33 with Matthew 18, evidently as bookends to remind readers of the need to reprove evildoers. God's instructions are very clear in Ezekiel. If you don't warn the wicked of their evil ways and they don't repent, they will die—and you will be responsible because you didn't warn them. But if you do warn the wicked and they don't repent, they will die, "but you will have saved your life." In Matthew 18 Jesus lays out a detailed process for calling sinners to repentance: first, go to that person alone. If he or she won't listen, take two or three witnesses. If there is still no response, tell the matter to the church—and if that fails, let that person be "as a Gentile or tax collector." If that sounds like excommunication, remember that Jesus was always reaching out to Gentiles and tax collectors! The goal for reproving someone who sins against you is not condemnation but reconciliation into the community.

But reproving sinners depends on knowing what is right and what is wrong. "Truly I tell you," said Jesus, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Just two weeks ago Jesus said almost the same thing to Peter in Matt 16:18-19:

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth

will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Some claim that Jesus' words to Peter are about right teaching while the words to the disciples are about church discipline. But why does the church discipline people? Through the ages the church has disciplined people for disobeying the teachings of the church. Copernicus and Galileo were disciplined for teaching that the earth revolved around the sun—a teaching that was deemed heresy based on scripture. Martin Luther was excommunicated for false teaching as well. Perhaps Luther favored Matthew 18 over Matthew 16 since tracing papal authority back to Peter didn't impress him!

Binding and loosing are rabbinic terms, defined as the authority to declare something forbidden or allowed. This means interpreting texts and traditions with the Spirit's guidance and in light of new understandings (i.e., science has shown that the earth does revolve around the sun). In Matthew 18, Jesus gives this authority not only to Peter, but also to the church, *ecclesia*—a word used by no other Gospel writer.

### Pastoral Reflection

Copernicus, Galileo, and Martin Luther were excommunicated for "loosing" traditional church teachings. Consider a less earth-shaking example: Thrivent Financial, formerly Lutheran Brotherhood, was founded in the midst of controversy. At the 1917 convention of the Norwegian Lutheran Church, a layman opposed the formation of the insurance company, based on Matthew 6: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink...Do not worry about tomorrow..." Therefore, you don't need insurance! However, another layman (who had been insurance commissioner for the state of Minnesota) cited a verse from Galatians: "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." Galatians and the insurance commissioner prevailed.

Since the time of Jesus, the church has had to prayerfully discern what to bind and what to loose. The Romans 13 text heard today comes right after these words from Paul: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God." When Nelson Mandela protested South Africa's apartheid government was that verse binding? Or consider gay marriage. Through years of study and debate, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America prayerfully discerned that prohibitions against same gender relationships needed to be loosed. This decision was not made by one person, but by *ecclesia*, the church. Some claim that our church has given up on the Bible. But if we're serious about the Bible, we hear Jesus calling the church to the task of binding and loosing. Jesus knew questions would arise in every generation that the Bible does not address, whether about insurance or apartheid or gay marriage.



I received an insight into our fear of losing the Bible while I was typing this. My computer flagged loosing as misspelled. I removed one o to make the word losing and the squiggly red line went away. But “loosing” is not the same as “losing.” It is possible to loose an oppressive teaching without losing the word of God. Our calling as a community of theologians is to struggle with biblical texts, trusting that we stand in a long line of believers who have loosed some texts for faithful reasons.

There is one more thing: we never do this alone. Binding and loosing can only be done in the presence of the One who called us to this ministry. Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt 18:20). Jesus is in our midst, assuring us that loosing is not losing.

*Barbara Lundblad*

## Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 17, 2017

**Genesis 50:15–21**

**Psalms 103: [1–7], 8–13**

**Romans 14:1–12**

**Matthew 18:21–35**

### Engaging the Texts

Forgiveness is at the heart of today’s readings. The Genesis story comes at the very end of that book and the preacher may need to fill in the backstory to show how radical it was for Joseph not to seek revenge against his brothers who sold him into slavery. Now those brothers are bowing before Joseph as he had predicted long ago in a dream (Genesis 37). With their father dead, the brothers are worried that Joseph would retaliate. “Do not be afraid,” he said to them. “Am I in the place of God?” He leaves that question hanging in the air and never speaks a clear word of forgiveness. Rather, he says that God brought good out of their evil plans, “in order to preserve a numerous people.”

Forgiveness is also at the center of the Matthew text. This reading comes just after Jesus’ instructions about improving someone who sins against you in order to reconcile them to the community. But Peter wanted to know “How often? Should I forgive as many as seven times?” That number seemed outrageous to Peter. Jesus’ answer was completely over the top: “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” That is, “Stop counting!”

Then Jesus tells a parable that is also outrageous. It is the story of a king who forgave a slave who owed him ten thousand talents, a sum that would take 150,000 years to repay. Then that forgiven slave goes out and refuses to forgive a fel-

low slave who owed him a much smaller amount. When the king found out, he was furious. “I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” That would have been a good ending, enough for Jesus to make his point. But the story goes on. The king handed the man over to be tortured “until he would pay his entire debt”—which he could never do. “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” Was that necessary?

Perhaps you will decide to preach on Romans instead! That wouldn’t be a bad idea. Rom 14:7–9 is a glorious affirmation of faith: “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” That’s worth at least one sermon.

### Pastoral Reflection

The last thing people will hear before you get up to preach is the king handing over the unforgiving slave to be tortured. Although a human king in a parable isn’t always a metaphor for God, Jesus is quite clear here: “my heavenly Father” will do this to those who fail to forgive. Is God a God who tortures? There is no adequate explanation except passion and hyperbole. Jesus is passionate about forgiveness in Matthew. He comments on only one petition of the Lord’s Prayer, the petition about forgiveness (Matt 6:14–15). Because Jesus is so passionate about forgiveness, he (or Matthew) uses hyperbole, that is, exaggeration to make a point. Jesus has used hyperbole before in 5:29–30 and 18:8–9. In both cases he says it’s better to poke out your eye or cut off your hand or foot than to allow them to lead you into sin. Did Jesus really urge maiming and dismemberment? No, but Jesus is passionate about the threat of temptation and the need for forgiveness.

The movie *Love Story* is remembered for the words, “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” But are those words true? A few years later, in a zany comedy *What’s Up, Doc?* Barbara Streisand’s character coos, “Love means never having to say you’re sorry” and Ryan O’Neal’s character says, “That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard.” Jesus would probably agree! How can we be forgiven if we never say, “I’m sorry I hurt you”?

Forgiveness isn’t easy. A friend told me about getting permission from the funeral director to spend time with her father’s coffin before anyone came to the viewing. She screamed and shouted words at his dead body that she hadn’t been able to say while he was alive. He had sexually abused her as a young girl. She could not forgive him and he had never admitted he had done anything wrong. We must take care not to ask people to forgive too soon. But we also know that not forgiving someone can burden us forever. David Lose sees a

connection between forgiveness and freedom:

Forgiveness, you see, is ultimately a decision about the past – the decision to accept both that *you cannot change the past* and also that *the past does not have to hold you captive*. Forgiveness is a decision about the past that ultimately determines the future. When you forgive, you release the past and enter into an open future. When you cannot forgive, you remain captive to that past until the end of time.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the best preparation for preaching on this text is to remember when you had a very hard time forgiving someone or a time when someone forgave you even though you didn't deserve it. Don't make forgiveness too easy or impossible.

Barbara Lundblad

## Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 24, 2017

**Jonah 3:10—4:11**

**Psalm 145:1–8**

**Philippians 1:21–30**

**Matthew 20:1–16**

### Reflections on the Texts

God's love and forgiveness are immense, abundant, and inclusive. However, too often we humans want to limit and exclude that mercy of God. Today's texts demonstrate in profound ways the consternation that arises when grace is shown to people we may perceive as undeserving. The preacher has ample opportunity to proclaim God's abundance in the midst of human injustice and power. A preacher could find plenty of good news to proclaim by centering themes around the words of the psalmist: "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Ps 145:8).

It is perhaps worthwhile to give a brief summary of the entire Jonah narrative before focusing on this episode where the prophet is wallowing in the aftermath of his message to Nineveh. Jonah has made an idol of his own lack of idolatry. He seems quite distraught that the residents of Nineveh have actually repented and changed. His own perceptions and stereotypes have gotten in the way. Even though Nineveh might not seem deserving to Jonah, God's mind is changed, and mercy is shown. When there is actual transformation because of his preaching, Jonah becomes angry, even to the point of wanting to die. Pastoral sensitivity is required when discussing

Jonah's mental health state, as there most likely will be those present in worship who have had similar feelings of anger and depression.

The story Jesus tells in Mathew 20, like that of Jonah, is a text full of strong emotions and angry blaming. It is a story of abundance and generosity in a context of scarcity and perceived economic injustice. The workers contracted in the morning actually receive the wage to which they originally agreed. They are not receiving less because the later workers got the same thing. This is a story of how human beings often have a negative reaction when they perceive that distribution of wealth is not equal. From the hateful rhetoric in the 1980s about "welfare queens" to the current-day polemical claims of immigrants taking our jobs, this sort of socioeconomic scapegoating often unfairly scapegoats people of color.

Both of these stories beg questions of social location. Where do you fit into the story? Do you feel more like a worker getting a surprising gift of abundance, or are you upset that others have different opportunities than you? Are you more like Jonah or more like someone from Nineveh?

In his eye-opening book, *Liberating Jonah: Forming an Ethics of Reconciliation*, Miguel A. De La Torre makes the compelling argument that middle class White North American Christians have long identified with Jonah, when we (myself included) should more accurately identify with the people of Nineveh. "It is a story of a rebellious prophet from the empire's margins who wants only to see his oppressors utterly destroyed and who is angry with an unjust God who has shown mercy to the enemy" (24).

To read the Jonah text from the perspective of a resident of Nineveh is to force ourselves to identify our own privilege and our own participation in powerful empires. Rather than using Jonah to think about our own call stories, we are to engage our own repentance stories—repentance for structural sin, institutional racism, and exploitative economic systems. As an Israelite prophet, Jonah would have been a marginalized voice in the midst of a powerful Assyrian empire. Israel was occupied territory under a colonialist force. As a nation, the United States is more like Assyria than Israel.

A sermon on Jonah could ponder aloud: Who are the prophets among us today in our country? in our communities? Who like Jonah is calling us to repent? This could be an opportunity to lift up a story of God's abundance among groups in your community whose voices are not always heard. This could be an opportunity to listen to our neighbors. This could be an opportunity to be intentional in discovering who are the rebellious prophets calling you to repentance and new understandings of God's presence.

Paul Baillie

1. David Lose, "Pentecost 14A: Forgiveness and Freedom," September 7, 2014.