

Eating and Idols: A Sermon About the Church in a Post- Christian Setting

1 Corinthians 8:1-13



I am going to begin my sermon by saying something controversial. A shift of what is called “epic proportions” has been taking place over the last several generations in Western culture: the collapse of Christendom. Christendom is the Western culture that existed after the emperor Constantine made Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. For the next several hundred years, Christianity spread, sometimes by mission and sometimes by conquest. The spread of Christianity was so effective that, even after the rise of Islam and the breaking up of the church in the Protestant Reformation, it was generally assumed in the Western world that almost everyone in the culture was in some sense Christian, even if they were not necessarily committed Church members. We see this in all kinds of ways that we don’t even think about. Our calendars are dated from the year that a sixth-century monk named Dionysius Exiguus placed the birth of Jesus, which became the normal way of dating in the Gregorian and Julian Calendars. Christmas and Easter are semi-official holidays

even if some people think that the decorations on Starbucks cups are part of a “war on Christmas.” There are church buildings in most town centers, and states like Pennsylvania still have “blue laws” that place restrictions on such things as the selling of alcohol on Sundays. (You can now buy alcohol on Sunday in Pennsylvania, but apparently it is still illegal to sell an automobile or to hunt on Sunday.) Our money says “In God We Trust,” and even the New Atheists are very clear that the God they do not believe in is the Christian God. And, up until recently, most people identified themselves as belonging to some kind of Christian church – whether Protestant or Catholic.

But this has been changing. Since World War II, fewer members of each generation have been identifying as Christian, and more and more identify as “unaffiliated,” or “nones,” not spelled N-U-N-S, but N-O-N-E-S, as in “none of the above.” In recent surveys, 80% of the World War II Generation identify with some kind of mainstream Christian denomination: Roman Catholic, Evangelical, or mainline Protestant. Only 11% identify as “unaffiliated.” With the Baby Boomers, those numbers begin to shift, and the percentage of unaffiliated rises to 17%. For Generation X, 23% are “unaffiliated,” and, among “younger millennials,” 36% do not identify with any historic Christian tradition.¹

All traditional Christian churches have lost membership, including both Evangelicals and Roman Catholics, but the group that has lost most is mainline Protestants, who account for 22% of the World War II Generation, but only 11% of Millennials. Significantly, “nones” are now the largest single group. While you’re more likely to be some kind of Christian than a “none” if you’re a millennial, you’re twice as likely to be a “none” as to be an Evangelical or a Roman Catholic, and you’re more than three times as likely to be a “none” than you are to be a mainline Protestant – a Lutheran, a Presbyterian, an Episcopalian or Anglican, a Congregationalist

or a Methodist. Among millennials, while some raised in Christian traditions become “nones,” the reverse is seldom the case. Those who are raised with no religious affiliation whatsoever stay that way. Growing up in a home without any religion is a good way of never becoming a member of any religious group.

I had to say earlier that this post-Christendom claim is controversial because just yesterday several of my friends on Facebook pointed to a new study that indicated that versions of Christianity that attract seriously committed Christians are not shrinking. However, I don't necessarily see a contradiction here. This could simply mean that the part of the population that was only nominally committed to Christian faith no longer sees the need to keep up the pretense.² Regardless, it appears that with each upcoming generation, a larger percentage no longer identifies with historic Christian faith.

In the last five to ten years, there has been a kind of cottage growth industry of experts who are giving the church advice about how to survive in this new post-Christendom setting. For example, the Eastern Orthodox writer Rod Dreher last year published a book entitled *The Benedict Option*, in which Dreher argues that Christians need to recognize that the dominant culture is now hostile to Christian faith, and we need to create a kind of neo-monastic Christianity whose goal or purpose is to preserve and pass on the faith to the next generation in the midst of this hostility.³ Evangelical philosopher James K. A. Smith has written *You Are What You Love*, in which he argues that post-modern secularism ultimately cannot satisfy basic human needs and that Christians need to recover a liturgical and catechetical spiritual formation that will provide a life-giving alternative to secularism.⁴ While it might seem as if Dreher and Smith are on the same page, they have engaged in a rather

public and nasty feud with one another recently with Smith strongly criticizing Dreher's new book, and Dreher saying that Smith is just angry because he didn't publish with Smith's publisher.⁵

So how might committed Christians respond to this new situation? I would suggest that St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians provides some very helpful advice. Because Paul lived 300 years before Christendom, in some ways his situation has real parallels to our own. Paul was a member of a minority Christian community trying to live within a dominant pagan culture that both misunderstood the rising new church, and persecuted it for not conforming to that dominant culture. In addition, the Corinthian church had a lot of parallels to many of our churches today. The Corinthians were mostly former pagans who were now trying to live as Christians, but still had one foot in the old pagan world, and this led to all kinds of problems. Paul's two letters to the Corinthians are largely a matter of Paul trying to sort out these problems, trying to straighten out the Corinthian mess, and explaining to the members of the Corinthian church how to live as faithful Christians in the midst of a hostile and corrupting pagan environment.

Paul seems to have had two main concerns in the first letter to the Corinthians. On the one hand, to preserve Christian identity. If the Corinthian church was to survive, it had to have a distinct identity over against the surrounding pagan culture. On the other hand, the church still needed to engage in mission to the surrounding culture, which meant that it could not simply raise the barricades or bar the doors. Each concern has its dangers. The temptation in preserving identity is that one becomes isolated from the culture, and mission disappears. The temptation in engaging in mission is unnecessary compromise with the culture, and distinct identity gets lost.

We see Paul's concern with Christian identity in a couple of places in 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul deals with a doctrinal issue. He corrects a group of Corinthians who do not seem to believe in the resurrection of the dead. Paul replies, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ is not raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." (1 Cor. 15:13-15). Then there is moral compromise. In chapter 5, Paul deals with the problem of a kind of semi-incestuous relationship of a man with his step-mother. Paul is appalled, and tells the Corinthians to cleanse themselves of this evil: "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump." (1 Cor. 5:6-7). In the next chapter, Paul addresses further questions of sexual immorality by reminding the Corinthians that their bodies belong to Christ, not to themselves: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you . . . You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6: 19-20). It is clear that, for Paul, on some issues there is no compromise. If there is some area in which following the surrounding culture will compromise the church's doctrinal or moral identity, the church must take a firm stand. (And, yes, I think it is absolutely clear where Paul would come down on the issues of sexuality that are currently dividing Western culture.)

At the same time, Paul is also concerned with mission to those outside the church. A great deal of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians has to do with problems concerning worship. There were problems having to do with speaking in tongues, and Paul wrote: "If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?" (1 Cor. 14:23).

So there is a tension that the church needs to maintain. On the one hand, over against the surrounding culture, Christian

identity must be maintained, both in what the church believes and in how it behaves, that is, the church must maintain both Christian doctrine and Christian practice. At the same time, even as the church is faithful to its identity as church, it needs to remember its mission to those outside. The church needs to be aware of how we come across to others – to those who are not the church. As the old saying goes, we should not be so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good.

And this leads us (finally) to this morning's reading. In 1 Corinthians, Paul has made clear how the church has to deal with issues where a clear gospel principle is at stake, but how should the church deal with areas of doctrinal or moral unclarity? What should we do in a situation where there is no clear right or wrong path to take? Here I think Paul might be most helpful for us today. In a sense, he is addressing the kind of disagreement I referred to earlier between Rod Dreher and Jamie Smith. Dreher's argument is that in this post-Christendom period, the church needs first and foremost to protect its own identity. The secular culture is hostile to the church, it is all too tempting to compromise with secularism, but if we do so, we will have no Christian identity to pass on to the next generation. In his own review of Dreher's book, Smith responds that Dreher's approach is alarmist, that it is based on fear rather than hope.

In this morning's passage, Paul is dealing with a problem of moral ambiguity similar to our own, not a clear-cut case of right and wrong, but of how Christians should act when living in the midst of a non-Christian environment. The practical issue for the Corinthians was that of "meat sacrificed to idols," not exactly a problem in our contemporary culture. In first-century pagan culture, there was a practice of sacrificing an animal to a deity; some of this meat would be eaten as part of a religious meal, and the rest would be sold in the meat market. Given the wide availability of this "idol meat," it could happen that a pagan might invite a Christian

over for dinner, only for the Christian to discover that the dinner consisted of this sacrificed meat. What to do? If you think this rather distant from our current setting, imagine the case of an orthodox Christian wedding cake baker or florist who is suddenly asked to bake a cake or prepare a flower arrangement for a gay wedding. Should they do it?

The Corinthians were divided. On the one hand, there was a group with firm consciences. These folks – the ones “in the know” – made the argument that, since, of course, there is only One real God, the pagan idols are not really gods. Since idols don’t really exist, it shouldn’t matter whether we eat meat sacrificed to an idol. To provide a contemporary illustration: should an orthodox Christian baker bake a cake for a gay wedding? Why not? As an orthodox Christian, the baker does not take gay marriage seriously. Why create a scandal when one is not necessary? Bake the cake.

On the other hand, there were those of more sensitive conscience. Their point of view was that to eat meat sacrificed to idols is to participate in idolatry, and a Christian cannot do that. To draw a practical contemporary illustration: for an orthodox Christian baker to bake a gay wedding cake is to participate in and implicitly to give one’s approval to gay marriage. And, as Dreher would argue, this is the one area where the church must not compromise.

Both sides had legitimate concerns, and both made a strong argument. How did Paul respond?

First, Paul urges both sides to remember to keep the main thing the main thing. Paul agrees with those of strong conscience that pagan idols do not really exist. A Jew of Paul’s time would have recited the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4, “Here, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Paul recites what has sometimes been called the Christian *Shema*: “For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’), yet

for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live" (1 Cor. 8:5-6). Paul tells his readers that food will not bring us closer to God, and we are no worse off if we do not eat or better off if we do. (If Paul were writing today, he might say that neither baking cakes nor not baking cakes will make us closer to God.)

So it would appear that Paul has sided with those of strong conscience here. There is only one God, and Jesus Christ is Lord, so idols do not really matter. (Sorry, Rod Dreher. Jamie Smith is right.) But to leave things there would be to forget what Paul had written earlier about this one Lord Jesus Christ in response to those who wanted to bring factionalism into the church by saying "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas" (1 Cor. 1:12). In response to this Christian factionalism, Paul wrote, "[W]e preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength." Paul then reminded the Corinthians, "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord'" (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

In that earlier passage, Paul's point about the foolishness of

the cross is that Christians should not imitate the world's factionalism by bringing factionalism into the church. The gospel is about the crucified Christ, not about Apollos or Cephas. Now Paul reminds those of confident conscience, those who "know" that idols have no reality, that that this person with whom they are in disagreement is a brother or sister in Christ, who has the same God as their Father, and is someone for whom Christ died. Paul reminds the strong of the foolishness of the cross. Those of strong conscience need to beware lest their "knowledge" might destroy someone for whom Christ died by forcing him or her to compromise their own conscience. Paul reminds his readers that there is something more important than being right – love: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1).

Paul does something that is very unusual here, and totally "out of sync" not only with ancient culture, but with our own – he tells us to respect the conscience of someone who disagrees with us, even if we are convinced that that person is wrong. One has a duty not to force someone else to compromise his or her conscience. I may be convinced that I am right, but my moral actions have consequences not just for me, but for others, and this needs to be a factor in my choices. Again, love is more important than being right. (So, sorry, Jamie Smith, is Rod Dreher right after all?)

Finally, note that Paul does not tell the Corinthians what they should do about their disagreement, but he does tell them what he would do: "[S]inning against your brothers or sisters and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother or sister stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother or sister stumble." Paul provides the Corinthians with principles, but not specific advice or rules, and he leaves the final decision up to them.

How then might what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians provide guidance for us as we seem to be moving into a post-Christian

culture? Should we listen to Rod Dreher or to Jamie Smith?

First, I would say that Paul does not give us clear-cut advice about whether we should do things like bake wedding cakes for gay weddings. He leaves it up to us to figure out how to sort out these kinds of disagreements. However, he does provide us with some basic principles.

Second, we need to be concerned about both Christian identity and Christian mission. In issues that are genuinely connected with basic Christian faith or practice, the church needs to remember who we are, and we cannot compromise. At the same time, we need to remember that the church does not exist for itself, but for those outside the church. If there can be no mission without identity, neither can there be identity without mission.

Third, we need to keep the main thing the main thing. Christianity is about Jesus Christ crucified, what Paul calls the “foolishness of the cross.” To follow Jesus does not mean that we will never have to suffer or experience pain or discomfort. We will. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “The cross is laid on every Christian. . . . The cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”⁶

However, because the cross is the main thing, we can relax a bit about things that are not the main thing. In times of confusion and strong disagreement, we in the church need to live with a certain humility. There is something more important even than being right, and that is to love our brother and sister for whom Jesus Christ died, even if that means that we might have to let someone have their way when we are certain that we are right and they are not.

Finally, I think in the current situation that we need to be

content with a certain amount of uncertainty. In a post-Christendom setting, the church is moving into a new situation, and in a lot of areas, there might well be no clear right or wrong answers. Certainly there are areas of Christian doctrinal identity or moral practice where the church must not compromise, but otherwise, what St. Paul provides us with are not absolutely certain answers about how to live as Christians in the midst of a no-longer Christian world, but rather a few basic principles about how to be faithful to and to trust Christ, how to remember that we have a mission to those outside the church, and, finally, how to be patient with and to love our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ even when we think they have got it wrong, because like us, they too are those for whom Jesus Christ has died.

1 For the source of the statistics, see Michael Lipka, "Millennials increasingly are driving growth of 'nones'"; <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>.

2 For the new study that claims that at least some kinds of churches are not losing members, see Landon Schnabel, Sean Bock, "The Persistent and Exceptional Intensity of American Religion: A Response to Recent Research," *Sociological Science* (Nov 2017), vol. 4, 686-700; https://www.sociologicalscience.com/download/vol-4/november/SocSci_v4_686to700.pdf. Schnabel and Bock claim: "Rather than growing irrelevance of religion in America as suggested by the secularization thesis, rising secularism is solely a function of the decline of moderate religion . . ." (p. 692).

3 Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017).

4 James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016).

5 James K. A. Smith, "The new alarmism: How some Christians are stoking fear rather than hope," *The Washington Post* (March 10, 2017); <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/03/10/the-new-alarmism-how-some-christians-are-stoking-fear-rather-than-hope/>; Rod Dreher, "The Benedict Arnold Option," *The American Conservative* (March 10, 2017); <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/benedict-option-benedict-arnold/>.

6 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 99.

[The Difference of God and the Difference it Makes: A Sermon](#)

Psalm 96.1-9(10-13)

Isaiah 45.1-7

1 Thess. 1.1-10

Mt. 22.15-22



Occasionally the lecture readings so clearly focus on a single topic that only a really clever

preacher can find a way to preach on something else. This morning seems to be one of those occasions. If I were to summarize this morning's lectionary readings with a single title it would be "The Difference of God and the Difference It Makes." Since I'm not a really clever preacher, I intend to preach on that topic. What do the readings say about God, and what difference does it make?

To do that, however, I am going to begin with some background. Sometimes in order to understand a topic, it helps to contrast it with something else. And this morning's lectionary readings do that. They contrast faith in the one true God with its opposite – belief in false gods, or idolatry. The Psalm declares "All the gods of the people are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens" (Ps. 96:5). In 1 Thessalonians Paul writes to his readers: "you turned to God from idols to serve the living God" (1 Thes. 1:9).

Belief in many gods was a common characteristic of ancient cultures. Not so much today. You have to look far and wide to find a genuine polytheist or someone who worships actual physical idols in contemporary Western culture. There are still polytheists of a sort in Asia. Traditional Hindus and at least some Buddhists believe in "gods" (plural) rather than in one God. And there are still gods (plural) in a lot of traditional tribal religions. But the problem in contemporary Western culture is not a literal belief in many gods, but a lack of genuine belief in any god – what I would call "unbelief." This is not necessarily atheism, but it is a way of living in which belief in the one God has nothing to do with the way that people live their lives day in and day out.

I am old enough to have lived through several different variations of "unbelief." Before terrorists flew airplanes into the Twin Towers in New York City, something called "pluralism" was popular. Often associated with "New Age" Religion, and what is sometimes called "Therapeutic Moralistic Deism," pluralism can be summed up in the saying, "All roads

lead to the same destination.” Former Episcopal Presiding Bishop Kathrine Jefferts Shori put it this way: when Jesus says in John’s gospel that he is the way, the truth, and the life, what that means is that Jesus is the way for Christians, not that Jesus is the way for everybody. The primary assumption of pluralism is that there is nothing unique about the Christian God.

The New Atheism appeared right after the fall of the Twin Towers. While pluralism might be willing to admit that there is at least some kind of God, the whole point of the New Atheism is to deny that any God exists. The New Atheists thrive on ridicule, combined with silly arguments that they think are really clever arguments. A standard New Atheist argument can be found in the claim that the only difference between the atheist and the Christian is that the atheist believes in one less god than the Christian. The Christian does not believe in gods like Thor or Zeus, and neither does the atheist. It just happens that the atheist does not believe in the Christian god either. For the New Atheist, there is no difference between the God of the Bible and Thor or Zeus. The fundamental assumption of the New Atheist is that the Christian God is just one god among others, and believing in any of them is foolish.

A third form of contemporary unbelief is consumerist secularism, or what we could call “normal nihilism.” In the nineteenth century, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche declared that “God is dead,” and he speculated about how society would respond to the nihilism that he believed was the logical conclusion of the death of God. What Nietzsche did not anticipate was the combination of unbelief and consumerism. Contemporary post-modern culture seems to have given up entirely on the optimism of the Enlightenment, but it has not despaired. Instead people go shopping. Why worry about whether there is any meaning or purpose to life as long as there is YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, the new iPhone, and another movie

in the Marvel Cinematic Universe? Normal nihilism is the assumption that we don't need God because we don't have time for God. We can buy lots of "stuff" to keep us distracted.

If there is any truth to the Christian notion of God, then all of the above are not so much false as simply mistaken. The three forms of contemporary unbelief have missed the point, but this morning's lectionary readings provide the point.

In the Old Testament reading from Isaiah 45, we hear one of the classic texts of biblical monotheism: "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no God" (Is. 45: 5). There is a fundamental difference between the God of the Bible, and the various gods of pagan polytheism or Eastern religions like Hinduism or Buddhism. The Biblical God is the Creator of everything that is. The Psalm from this morning's lectionary reads: "All the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens" (Ps. 96:5). In the reading from Isaiah, we hear: "I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the Lord, who does all these things." (Is. 45: 6-7).

Again, there is a fundamental difference between the One God who is the Creator and the "many gods" of polytheistic religions. No pagan gods can be genuine creators because polytheism always divides up the task of running things among different deities. Zeus and Thor are gods of thunder. Aphrodite is the goddess of love. Mars is the god of war, and Poseidon is the god of the sea. The pagan gods cannot create a universe because they are characters who live in a universe that is bigger than they are, and each one of them has their own limited task to keep it running. However, if there is one God and that God is the Creator of everything that is, then God is not "one more item" in the universe like Thor or Zeus. God is not "in" the universe at all because God accounts for the universe's very existence.

However, to believe in a Creator, it is not enough just to say that God accounts for the existence of the universe, as if God started things rolling with the big bang around 14 billion years ago, and occasionally steps in now and then to do something like perform a miracle. The Christian doctrine of creation is that God both creates and sustains the universe, and that if God were to cease creating even for a millisecond, the universe would blink out like a burnt out light bulb. The Christian doctrine of creation means that God is present to every aspect of his creation at every moment, and is guiding his creation to its eventual completion in what is called the eschaton, or the new creation. Historically, that is the Christian doctrine of providence, and we see it in the Isaiah passage when God says of the Persian Emperor Cyrus the Great: "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him . . . I will go before you and level the exalted places . . . I call you by your name, though you do not know me. . . . I equip you though you do not know me" (Is. 45:1, 2, 4, 5). When Cyrus conquered the Babylonians, this allowed the people of Israel to return from exile to their own land. Cyrus had his own goals in conquering Babylon, but through the words of the prophet, we find out that God had intentions that Cyrus knew nothing about. God used Cyrus to accomplish that purpose even though Cyrus did not know it.

The ancient polytheistic religions could not have a doctrine of providence because there was no single god who was in charge of everything. What they believed in instead was something called fate, and fate controlled even the destiny of the gods. If your name is Oedipus, you're going to kill your father and marry your mother, and there is nothing you can do about it.

Modern people do not believe in fate, but they do believe in something called "progress." What is progress? Progress is basically the same thing as the pagan doctrine of fate, but

with an optimistic post-Enlightenment spin. Progress is fate with a Harvard MBA. When you hear people talk about being on the “right” or “wrong side of history,” that’s the language of “progress.”

But belief in progress is sheer superstition, just as much as the pagan belief in fate. If you don’t believe that there is a personal Creator who exercises providence over creation, then history can have no right or wrong sides. And progress has one serious disadvantage over a belief in providence. Progress is impersonal, and so it cannot forgive. In a world in which progress rules, what happens to those who are on what is currently the “wrong side of history”? They must be forced to conform, or else to be eliminated.

So the first point to be drawn from this morning’s lessons is that if the God of the Bible exists, then there is only one, God is the Creator of everything that is, and history has a purpose and a direction.

The second point to be drawn from this morning’s lessons is that if the God of the Bible exists, then God is with us. The New Testament goes beyond what the Old Testament says about God as Creator by saying that the God who has created the world has come among his creation by becoming a creature himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. 1 Thessalonians is probably the first letter written by Paul in the New Testament, in which case this morning’s lectionary reading provides the first mention of the Trinity in all of Christian literature. Paul writes that God the Father has shown his love for the Thessalonians, who have come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Son whom God has raised from the dead, and who will deliver us from the “wrath to come,” and that the gospel (or good news) has come to the Thessalonians in the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 1:3-4, 9-10).

Of course, Paul does not spell out his complete Christology and soteriology in these few verses, and we have to read all

of Paul's letters to understand fully what it meant for Paul to speak of God's presence in Jesus, and of what Paul meant by salvation in Christ, and the gift of God's grace to the church in the presence of the Holy Spirit. I assume that since this is a seminary, you have a basic grasp of that material.

A popular song from the 1990's had the lyrics, "What if God was one of us, just a slob like one of us?" The basic point of what Paul says about Jesus Christ is that Jesus is God's personal presence among us. In Jesus, the God who created the universe became one of us. This is an audacious claim if you think about it. According to modern scientists, the edge of the observable universe is about 93 billion light years in diameter. The Milky Way, our own galaxy, contains somewhere around 100 thousand million stars, of which our sun is only one. The universe contains somewhere between 200 billion and 2 trillion galaxies, so there are far more suns in the universe than there are grains of sands on all of the beaches of the world. The doctrine of the incarnation is that the Lord who "made the heavens," who created all of this, became one of us, a human being who lived on one planet orbiting around a single star in just one of the unfathomable number of galaxies in the universe.

And this is where contemporary unbelief simply misses the point. If Jesus Christ is God become a human being, then Jesus cannot be compared to other religious leaders or philosophers any more than the God who created the entire universe can be compared to gods like Zeus or Thor. Moses, Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, and Mohammed have in common that they were all sinners who needed salvation. And they are all dead. Jesus did not need salvation because he is the Savior. Unlike all of these other religious leaders, Jesus is not dead. Because Jesus is the Son of God incarnate, because God his Father raised him from the dead, Jesus is alive, and Jesus is God with us.

The third theme that appears in this morning's readings is

that of "Election" or "Covenant." If the God of the Bible exists, then God has a people. In the Isaiah passage we read that God has chosen Cyrus to do his purposes "[f]or the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen" (Is. 45:4). In 1 Thessalonians, Paul writes of the Thessalonians that they are "loved by God," and that God "has chosen you." The Thessalonians had "turned from idols to serve the living and true God," and so Paul writes that he "gives thanks" because of the "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" that existed among the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:2-4, 9).

Contemporary culture is more and more obsessed with issues of identity and belonging – the value of what is called "diversity." Unfortunately, competing identity groups have led not to community, but to alienation – of group fighting against group. This seems more and more to be the case since the last presidential election, and attempts to engage in conversation seem to only result in more anger, more raised voices, and more people talking past one another. American culture is divided by race, by issues of sexuality and gender identity, by politics, by class, by education, by religion. Things are no better internationally, with decades of continuing war and unrest in the Middle East, with religious persecution in Asia and Africa, with the apparent collapse of what seemed to have been the promise of the European Union, and even with the very real possibility of nuclear war for the first time in decades.

In the midst of the collapse of community on a global level, the Bible's assertion that the solution to humanity's problems lies in God's selection of a special people seems almost ludicrous. But it would have seemed just as ludicrous when the prophet wrote to the Persian Emperor Cyrus that God had anointed him "for the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen" (Is. 45:4). At this point in history, Israel consisted of only a remnant of the tribe of Judah, the last remaining of

the original twelve tribes of Israel that somehow had survived being exiled in Babylon. Yet today Cyrus and the Persian Empire no longer exist, but both the synagogue and the church do. Certainly it would have seemed ludicrous to the leading political and social leaders of the Roman Empire in the first century that Paul would have written to a backwater group in Thessalonica that they were loved and chosen by the God who had created the entire universe. Yet the Roman empire is long gone, and the church still exists, with millions of Christians still doing what the Thessalonians did, gathering for worship every Sunday, reading the Scriptures, baptizing new Christians into the community, and sharing in the broken bread of the Eucharist.

The message of the gospel is that since the God of the Bible exists, the alienation of divided communities is overcome because the God who created the entire universe is among us in Jesus Christ through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes of the Thessalonians that they had turned from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9). The solution to this mess of division not only in ancient cultures, but in today's Western secular cultures who do not think that they need God because they have their own idols of self-sufficiency, group identity, or consumerist "stuff" is that it is only by turning from those idols to serve the living and true God that they can experience genuine community.

And, of course, if God has a people, election can embrace even those who are not God's people. The church has a mission to those who are not God's people. The Psalmist calls on God's people to "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples" (Ps. 96:3). The Psalmist says that the gods of the people are worthless idols, but the same people who worship those idols are called to ascribe to God the glory due his name. It is by knowing and worshiping this God who has created the world, who has come among us in Jesus Christ, who has chosen the church to be his people, that a new

community of reconciliation can be created.

What then is the mission of this people, of those of us who find ourselves in the church of Jesus Christ, this community who have been chosen, redeemed, and loved by the one God who made the entire universe?

First, we can put the culture's false idols in proper perspective. When Jesus was asked about whether it is permissible to pay taxes to the pagan emperor Caesar, he responded: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). Jesus acknowledged the idolatrous nature of Caesar's claim. Only God deserves our ultimate loyalty. At the same time, Jesus refused to let himself become entangled in a test to see if he would simply reject Caesar's authority. Jesus had faith in providence, not progress. As followers of Jesus, Christians do not have to worry about being on the "right side of history" because we have placed our faith not in human idols, but in the God who controls history.

Because the God who created the entire universe has become incarnate in Jesus Christ, Christians look to Jesus to find the clues to the meaning and purpose of our lives, our futures, and of human history. As followers of Jesus, Christians do not follow one path among others. Instead, Christian discipleship means following the path of Jesus Christ through suffering and even death to resurrection. As Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians, this is the path that begins with the work of faith, leads to the labor of love, and concludes with the steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 1: 3). Following this path means gratitude to the Father who is our Creator and Redeemer and joy in the Holy Spirit. To quote the Psalm, it is the path of worship – to sing to the Lord a new song, to tell of his salvation, to ascribe to the Lord glory and strength, to worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness (Ps. 96: 1, 7, 9).

Finally, this is a path which is not to be followed alone. The God who created the universe, who has come among us in Jesus Christ has a people, and that people is his church, his *ecclesia* – those who have been called out by God. The mission of Jesus is a mission of reconciliation to enemies and strangers, and so the church should primarily be marked by forgiveness and charity for one another. Because Christians have turned from idols to serve the living God, we love one another.

But the path of following Jesus does not end with the church. God has chosen a people in order to give them a mission. The church has an invitation to those who do not yet know that there is one God who has created the universe, and has redeemed it in Jesus Christ. As God chose Cyrus in order to make it known from the East to the West that there is none beside the God who created the heavens and earth, so it is the mission of the church to extend God's invitation to those who do not yet know that the one true God has created them and has come among them and reconciled them to himself in Jesus Christ. As the Psalmist writes: "Tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all peoples! . . . For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens" (Ps. 96:2, 5).

[Love Inseparable: A Sermon](#)

Nehemiah 9:16-20

Psalm 78

Romans 8:35-39

Matthew 14:13-21



Every reader of the Bible will sooner or later discover certain tensions that are hard to hold together. We discover just such a tension in this morning's lectionary readings, a tension that has been with the church since its very beginnings. In Paul's epistle to the Romans, we read one of those classic affirmations of Christian faith: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:35, 38-39).

Yet when we read the Old Testament readings, it seems that there are lots of things that can separate us from God's love. The two Old Testament readings are shortened selections from longer accounts of God's dealings with the people of Israel. In the Psalm we are told that after the Israelites questioned God, "when the Lord heard, he was full of wrath; a fire was kindled against Jacob; his anger rose against Israel, because they did not believe in God and did not trust his saving power." (Ps. 78:21-22). The lectionary reading omits a good deal of what the Psalm says later, which tells over and over of how Israel kept sinning, and how God responded to Israel's sin: "[T]hey tested and rebelled against the Most High God and did not keep his testimonies . . . When God heard, he was full

of wrath, and he utterly rejected Israel.” (Ps. 78:56, 59). In a later section of the Nehemiah reading, we read about Israel: “they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back.” And Nehemiah describes God much as did the Psalm: “Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer.” (Neh. 9:26, 27). The Psalm and the passage from Nehemiah seem to say that at least some things can separate us from God’s love.

Certainly there seems to be some kind of tension here between God’s love and God’s justice, and people have often found it difficult to hold both together. In the second century, a heretic named Marcion concluded that there were actually two different Gods – a New Testament God of love who was good, and an Old Testament God of justice who was evil. Marcion’s solution to the problem was to throw out the Old Testament completely. There have been modern Christians who have come to the same conclusion. When I was doing my doctoral studies, I once heard the wife of an Episcopal priest say that the God of the Old Testament is the devil in the New Testament, and she was quite serious. If most Christians don’t go quite so far, there are many Christians who, if they were honest, would admit that the God of the Old Testament sometimes makes them uncomfortable.

But if, as Christians, we take the Bible seriously, then we have to take the whole Bible seriously. In the second century, Irenaeus of Lyons was the church’s first great theologian, and he insisted against Marcion that there is only one God, that there is one Bible with two parts, an Old Testament and a New Testament, and that the God who is the God of Israel in the Old Testament is the same God who is the Father of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. In fact, Irenaeus was the first writer we know of to use the terms Old and New Testament to describe the Bible. As Anglicans, we show that we stand with Irenaeus and not Marcion by using a lectionary that includes readings from both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

How then do we hold this tension between God's love and God's justice together? I would begin by saying that the contrast between an Old Testament God of justice and a New Testament God of love is too simplistic. When people use that kind of language it means that they have not read either the Old Testament or the New Testament very carefully. Both the Old and New Testaments equally affirm first and foremost that God is love and God is good. In the New Testament, 1 John 1:48 reads, "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." But in the Old Testament, Psalm 34:8 says, "Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him."

If we are going to understand how the Old Testament writers think about God's goodness, we need to understand three different concepts or ideas, and we see all three in this morning's OT readings. The first is the notion of "covenant." In the ancient Near East, a covenant was an agreement or relationship between two people or two groups of people. As part of the covenant, both parties would make an agreement that included promises that each side would fulfill. Often the covenant was between a ruler and a group of people. The ruler might promise to protect the people, and in return the people would promise to be faithful to the ruler, and to not make covenants with other rulers. In the Old Testament, this covenant idea is one of the key ideas used to understand the relationship between God and the people of Israel. When God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, God made a covenant with Israel, and he promised to protect them and care for them as a people. In return, Israel promised to be faithful to God and to worship no other gods. Jeremiah 30:22 sums up the covenant in these words: "And you shall be my people, and I will be your God." We find this notion of covenant in an earlier section of the Nehemiah reading that we did not read this morning: "You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. You found his heart faithful before you, and made

with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous.” (Nehemiah 9:7-8).

Another two notions are closely tied to covenant: loving kindness and holiness. “Loving kindness” is the English translation of the Hebrew word “*hesed*.” There is no real correct English translation. It is sometimes translated “loving kindness” and sometimes as “steadfast love.” In Exodus, when God appeared to Moses on Mt. Sinai, he said: “[I am] The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” (Exodus 34:6). In Deuteronomy, God addressed the people of Israel, “It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations . . .” (Deut. 7:7-9). We find this concept of “loving kindness” or “steadfast love” in this morning’s Nehemiah passage as well: “[Y]ou are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love . . .” (Nehemiah 9:17).

So, first, God has made a covenant with Israel, and this covenant is based entirely on God’s loving kindness or steadfast love. *Hesed* or loving kindness is the word that describes the benevolence of this covenant relationship.

But this leads to the second aspect of the covenant relationship. Both partners in a covenant are expected to show *hesed* or “steadfast love” to one another, not simply God, but also Israel. This leads to the second side of how the Old

Testament describes God's goodness, holiness. In the Old Testament, because God is good, God is also holy. There is nothing evil or unloving in God, and when God enters into a covenant with Israel, he expects his covenant people to be like him. As part of his covenant with Israel, God gives them a law, and God's expectation of holiness is illustrated in what are called the two tables of the ten commandments. As Jesus made clear, the ten commandments can be summed up in two Old Testament laws. Deuteronomy 6:5 reads: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might," and Leviticus 19:18 reads "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." As Jesus said, "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matt. 22:40).

So when God made his covenant with Israel, he gave them a set of commandments, a law, and he commanded them "Be holy as I am holy." (Leviticus 19:1). This morning's Psalm describes the covenant this way: "He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children . . . so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments." (Psalm 78:5-7).

But we know how that turned out. In the Old Testament, God is really good at keeping his side of the covenant, but Israel is often really bad at it. When Moses climbed up Mt. Sinai to receive the stone tablets on which the ten commandments were written, the people almost immediately built a golden calf and worshiped it. "These are the gods," they said, "who brought us out of Egypt." (Ex. 32:4).

The story of the Old Testament is largely the story of how God always keeps his side of the covenant, but Israel repeatedly failed to do so. That is the central theme of this morning's readings. The Psalmist writes, "They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to his law. They forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them."

(Psalm 78:10-11). Similarly, in Nehemiah, we read: “But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt.” (Nehemiah 9:16-17).

And so this is the source of the tension between God’s love and God’s justice. It is not that there are two Gods, an Old Testament God of justice and a New Testament God of love. Nor is God like a bad parent or spouse, sometimes in a good mood and sometimes in a bad mood, and you can never be sure which. Rather, throughout the Old Testament, God is portrayed as being the God of *hesed*, the God of loving kindness or steadfast love who loves Israel and keeps his covenant. However, the people consistently forget the covenant, and disobey it, and so there is a tension. The tension, however is not in God himself, but between God and his covenant people. If you’ve ever read the Old Testament all the way through, you have probably noticed that this theme of Israel’s failure to keep the covenant is perhaps the central theme in all of the books between Judges and 2 Kings, and it is certainly a key theme in the writings of the OT prophets.

Given Israel’s failure to keep the covenant, we might expect that God would respond with judgment – and we certainly find this theme of judgment in this morning’s readings. In the Psalm, we’re told that God’s “anger rose against Israel, because they did not believe in God and did not trust his saving power.” (Ps. 78:21-22), and later in Nehemiah, we read: “Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer.” (Neh. 9:27).

However, judgment is not the final answer to the problem of Israel’s disobedience to the covenant. If *hesed* is the beginning of the covenant, then *hesed* is also the conclusion of the covenant. *Hesed* means not only that loving kindness is the beginning of the covenant, but that God’s loving kindness

fulfills the covenant even when Israel fails to do so.

And so, there are two new notions that need to be introduced into the discussion, one that appears in the Old Testament, and one that really has to wait until the New Testament. The first notion is something radically new, "mercy." God's *hesed*, God's loving kindness, means that God shows faithfulness to the covenant even when Israel disobeys. God continues to show loving kindness by forgiving and having mercy. We see this particularly in the Nehemiah passage: "Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, 'This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,' and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. . . . You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst." (Neh. 9:18-20) And so we find that *hesed* or loving kindness means that God does not give up on Israel even if Israel fails to hold up their end of the covenant. In Isaiah, God insists that his covenant is eternal, despite Israel's unfaithfulness: "'For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,' says the Lord, who has compassion on you." (Is. 54:8, 10).

But this need for God to transform loving kindness to mercy shows an inherent problem with the covenant. What happens to the covenant if one member continually fails to keep the covenant? Can there be a covenant with only one partner? In Jeremiah 31, we find that Israel's failure to keep up their end of the covenant means that God will have to solve the problem in his own way: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord."

The new covenant solves the problem of Israel's disobedience in two ways: First, God will create a faithful covenant partner who will obey his law from the heart: "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people." And, second, God will keep his end of the covenant by showing mercy. "For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jer. 31:31-34).

And this is where we must finally turn to the New Testament, and the second new notion, what the New Testament calls "grace" or the "gospel." The Old Testament ends with this promise of a solution to the problem of the unfaithful covenant partner, but the promise is left hanging. However, when we turn to the good news of the gospel, we find that in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, God has himself fulfilled the promise, and solved the problem of the unfaithful partner by himself becoming the faithful covenant partner. And this is what the New Testament calls "grace."

At the beginning of Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul expands on the problem of the unfaithful covenant partner by arguing that we are all in the place of Israel. In the face of God's goodness and holiness, none of us can claim to be holy or righteous or innocent – we are all unfaithful covenant partners – and yet God in Christ has become the perfect covenant partner to do what we could not do. Paul writes "There is no difference [between Jew and Gentile], for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." (Rom. 3:22-23). So the covenant God of Israel in the Old Testament is now also the covenant God of Gentiles. Paul writes: "is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the

uncircumcised through faith.” In 2 Corinthians, Paul makes clear that God has solved the problem of our unfaithfulness as covenant partners by God himself becoming the faithful covenant partner in Christ: “For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor. 5:21). Because Jesus Christ is fully God, he is able to represent the divine side of the covenant, but because he is also fully human, he is able to be the faithful human covenant partner as well.

It is also through Jesus that God is able to keep the two sides of the promise of the new covenant that God made in the book of Jeremiah. First, there is mercy. In Romans 5:8, Paul writes, “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Paul goes on to write, “For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (v. 10). In Romans 8:32, Paul asks, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” As God promised in the book of Jeremiah, because of what he has done in Jesus Christ, he will remember our sins no more.

Then, there is the second half of the promise in Jeremiah. “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Because we are united to Jesus Christ in baptism, we share in the power of his death and resurrection. Again, Paul wrote: “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:2). Paul goes on to say that because we are united to Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection, God has given us his Holy Spirit to live within us, and this solves the problems of both sides of the unfaithful covenant partner: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in

Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. . . . By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, [God] condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." (Rom. 8:1-4). For Christians, there is both forgiveness of sins, and a participation in Christ's own death and resurrection that enables us to be faithful covenant partners, to live a new life by walking according to the Holy Spirit who now lives inside us.

I realize that I have covered a lot of material, and I could say a lot more. The main point that I want to make clear is that we do not have to worry about whether we can trust God. There are not two Gods, a God of love who can sometimes be trusted, and a God of justice who must rather be feared. Rather, there is the one faithful and loving God of *hesed*, the God of steadfast love or loving kindness who made a covenant with Israel and has fulfilled that covenant in Jesus Christ. Despite Israel's failure to keep the covenant, and our own failures, our own sinfulness, God is faithful to his promises and never ceases to love us. The good news of the gospel is that in Jesus Christ, God himself has become the faithful covenant partner, and in Jesus, God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. And so we can conclude this sermon by reciting with confidence the words of Paul in this morning's epistle reading: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:35-39).

Bad Rulers and Worse Judges: A Sermon About Our Current Political Situation

Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 17: 14-20

Psalm 50

Luke 18:1-8



As a country, we have been living for the last several years in a political situation that is as divisive as anything I can remember in my lifetime, and things have only become more divisive in the few months since the presidential election. The news media make comparisons to the Vietnam era and to the Watergate scandal, to the cultural and social divisions of the Civil Rights era. I do agree that we're living through that kind of division again. It's also true that on the different sides of whatever political divisions we're facing today, there seems to be a palpable disappointment in the leaders of our country, a kind of feeling among a lot of people that our leaders have failed. But also a loss of faith in the ability of politicians to make any difference.

Despite the angry divisions, there is at least one other commonality. All sides in the current divisions seem to share a common grievance, an outrage over injustice. All sides seem to think that their side has been the victim of outrageous

injustices committed against them by the other side.

In this social context, I find this morning's lectionary readings to have a kind of poignant relevance. The themes of good and bad rulers, and of justice and concern about injustice are common to all three lectionary readings.

The setting of the Deuteronomy passage is Moses's farewell speech to the people of Israel as they prepare to enter the land of Canaan. In the speech, Moses gives instructions for appointing judges and kings. In both cases, the requirements are primarily negative. They explain what is not to be done. Judges are not to show partiality; they are not to take bribes. Positively, they are to care only about justice.

Negatively, kings are not to use their office as a way of personal gain. They are not to acquire lots of horses they are not to acquire many wives. They are not to acquire silver and gold. Finally, they are not to put themselves above those whom they rule. They may be kings, but they are still fellow Israelites.

As we read the description of what the king is not supposed to do, we cannot help but think of King Solomon, who did all the things the passage here forbids. He created a great military with lots of horses. He had hundreds of wives. He taxed his people in order to become wealthy. One way to read Deuteronomy is as saying, "Don't be like Solomon."

The Psalm continues with the theme of judges by portraying an out of the ordinary court-room scene. This trial is different because in this case, it is God who is the judge, and the defendants are the people of Israel. God judges the people with whom he has made a covenant, and he finds them wanting. The basic charge before the court is that the practice of the people is in conflict with what they claim to believe. On the one hand, they are externally pious. They are doing all the right liturgical things. They offer all the right sacrifices

and burnt offerings. They know what color of vestments to wear during which liturgical season, and they always follow the rubrics. At the same time, the day to day life of the people is filled with injustice. In the temple, the people put on a good show, but in their day to day lives, they keep company with adulterers, that is, they tolerate sexual infidelity. They are pleased to associate with thieves; that is, they tolerate economic injustice. Finally, they speak lies against their neighbor. They are guilty of slander.

To make matters worse, the ever so pious reduce God to their own moral level. They assume that because they perform the proper liturgical rituals that God will be happy with them, and he will not only overlook their acts of injustice, but that he will approve of them, that the God they pretend to worship is just like they are.

The third passage is another story of a trial, and, in this trial we encounter exactly the kind of unjust judge that Deuteronomy warns against. In Jesus' parable, he tells the story of a judge who fears neither God nor human beings. There is a widow – one of those poor Israelites about whom Deuteronomy warns that the judge should not show partiality – who is asking the judge for justice. However, Jesus surprises his hearers in two ways. First, the judge finally grants the widow's request, although certainly not for praiseworthy motives. At first he tries to ignore her, but in the end, he gives her what she wants because he gets tired of having to listening to her complain. Second, Jesus surprises his hearers by comparing God – the righteous judge of the Psalm – to such a dishonest Judge. Of course, Jesus's point is not that God is like the dishonest judge, someone who eventually gives in because he is tired of hearing us complain. Rather, Jesus tells us how God is like the judge by telling us that he is not like him. If even a dishonest judge will ultimately give justice, certainly the God who is just and cares about justice will give justice to his people who cry to him day and night.

God will not allow the hopes of his people to be disappointed.

All three of the passages portray a contrast that is just as evident today as it was when the Bible was written – a contrast between justice and injustice, a contrast between judges and kings whose job is supposed to be about serving people and bringing justice to those who have been denied it, but instead use their position to make themselves richer, who take bribes, who show partiality to their friends or family or those who grease their palms; who use their power and influence to line their own pockets.

In that light, it is interesting to look again at the Psalm and Jesus's parable. They do more than simply shake their heads at predictably corrupt politicians. Rather, they point out that there is another Judge and another Ruler besides the corrupt judges and politicians with whom we're all too familiar. According to the Psalm and according to the parable, justice is not simply an abstraction which sometimes is fulfilled, but more often is not. They suggest that behind the demands in Deuteronomy to follow justice, and only justice, there is another judge, and he is just because justice is who he is. This judge cannot be fooled by our pious temple worship if we steal from our brother or sister, gossip about and slander our neighbor or even our enemy, and compromise even so slightly our marital vows. This God hears the prayers of the victims. And both Jesus and the Psalmist promises that God will act.

I could end the sermon here, which would likely leave us hoping that someday God's justice would reign, but regretting that for now it too often does not. But that would be to leave the story before it's finished. And the gospel makes clear that this is not where the story ends.

To find out how the story ends we need to look at another trial. The gospels all end with the story of some rulers and judges who were sent by central casting to play the roles for

the unjust judges that Deuteronomy warns about. At the end of Luke's gospel, Pontius Pilate is the unjust judge who shows partiality and does not dispense justice. Herod is the king who mocks the innocent one who comes before him. And the Jewish religious leaders act out the Psalm perfectly. They have the external formalities of proper worship down pat, yet in the end, they joined forces with a thief by paying Judas a bribe to betray Jesus, and they slandered the innocent by condemning Jesus as a blasphemer and by charging him with treason against Caesar. The gospels all conclude with the story of a trial that is a betrayal of justice by a coalition of unjust judges, rulers, and religious leaders. The supreme irony is that the charge posted to Jesus' cross reads "The King of the Jews." The real paradox is that the one on the cross was the real King of Israel. The One Truly Just Judge died in a case of miscarriage of justice by false judges, kings, and religious leaders.

The trial does not end there, of course. As we all know, the gospel stories conclude by telling us that Jesus did not stay dead. The same Judge who makes his case in the Psalm makes his case in the gospels by raising Jesus from the dead. The God of Israel whom Jesus addressed as Father raised his Son and so pronounced the final verdict. What appears to be a trial of Jesus turns out to be the trial of the unjust judges. God is now the judge, but this time he calls the accusers to the stand. However, not simply Pilate and Herod and the Chief Priests, but everybody is found guilty. The Roman Soldiers. The crowd who cried "crucify him." Certainly Judas who betrayed him. But also Peter who promised he would not deny him and did. All of the other disciples who fled.

But this trial has a surprising outcome. Although the resurrection reverses the verdict of the unjust judges, this does not result, as we might expect, in their condemnation. The death and resurrection of Jesus pronounce a peculiar verdict on those who crucified him and abandoned him. On the

cross, Jesus prayed for his killers, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 24:34) After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples who denied and abandoned him and his first words to them were "Peace be with you." When they were understandably frightened, he did not reprimand them for their lack of faith but spoke the words "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself!" (Luke 24:36-37)

If nothing else, the gospel story of the supreme miscarriage of justice that is turned on its head by the resurrection should force us to rethink our own normal understanding of politics and justice. How might the gospel story of Jesus' trial speak to our own confused cultural and political situation today?

First, it should be clear that the Bible has no illusions about the fallibility of human rulers or political leaders. The Old Testament history is a history of good kings and bad kings, but mostly bad and the book of 2 Kings ends in judgment with the entire nation of Israel taken into captivity along with their bad kings. The New Testament also speaks of mostly bad rulers: the Herods and Pontius Pilate; the book of Acts ends with the apostle Paul in Rome on the verge of being executed by Caesar. For the last several decades, American Christians of whatever political stripe, have placed too much faith in politicians. If we knew our Bibles, we would not be surprised. As the Psalmist writes, "Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation." (Psalm 146:3)

The cross and resurrection of Jesus relativize the claims of the unjust judges who condemn the innocent, who slander the weak, who take bribes. God demands justice of rulers, but there should be no surprise when injustice happens instead. We should neither place too much hope in worldly saviors, nor be surprised when they disappoint.

At the same time, the cross and resurrection mean that God will vindicate his elect who cry for justice day and night, but his way of doing so is not through straightforward defeat of the wicked. The cross means that God overcomes injustice by going through it and taking that injustice on himself. The doctrine of the incarnation means that God become human takes the full weight of human injustice on himself in the cross and overcomes it by triumphing over death through life.

How then might Christians survive during this period of moral and political confusion, of rampant injustice and bad or incompetent rulers and politicians? I would suggest that there are three characteristic Christian virtues that are rooted in the message of the cross and resurrection: patience, forgiveness, and hope.

First, Christians are called to patience. Martyrdom comes from the Greek word for "witness," and a martyr is the classic model of Christian sainthood. Christians are by definition, cultural outsiders. We serve another king, and walking in the path of the cross means at least the possibility of suffering. St. Paul writes about his own apostleship "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." (2 Cor. 4:8-10) To be a martyr means to be a witness by suffering injustice with patience.

Second, Christians are called to forgive. That Jesus bore the judgment of those who condemned him means that there is hope for forgiveness even for those who are guilty of condemning the innocent. Otherwise, what hope would there be for any of us? It is not just Pilate and the Jewish leaders who came under judgment when Jesus was crucified, but even Peter who denied Jesus, and the disciples who deserted him. That Jesus appeared to those same disciples who had deserted him with words of peace means that injustice and our own failures are

overcome by forgiveness. Because we ourselves have been forgiven, we can forgive even those who deny us justice.

Finally, Christians are called to hope. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that there is another judge, and this judge has conquered the ultimate injustice of death. The Christian religion is not the opiate of the people, as Karl Marx claimed; rather, Jesus' resurrection is an assurance that justice has a transcendent basis, and God's justice will ultimately prevail. At the same time, such hope is not only eschatological, reserved for the last judgment. While we may be disappointed in unjust judges and corrupt politicians, hope means we also should expect and be pleasantly surprised by glimpses of grace in unexpected places. Pontius Pilate and the Jewish religious leaders were certainly disappointments, but no one expected Joseph of Arimathea.

So we have patience, forgiveness, and hope. This is how the church is called to endure, not only in these confusing times, but in all times. In the words of St. Paul: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." (Rom. 15:13) Amen.

Division and Reconciliation: **A Sermon**

The following is perhaps the closest I've ever gotten to preaching a political sermon. It is also a good example of what to do if you misread the lectionary reading. The epistle text was actually from 1 Cor. 2, which I misread as 1 Cor. 12. Lesson? If you make a mistake, just keep on going. I had the

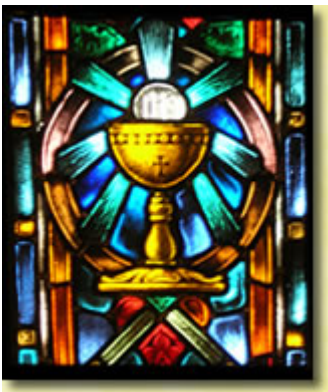
reader read from 1 Cor. 12, and proceeded as if it was supposed to be that way. It turns out that 1 Cor. 12 works just fine as the epistle reading along with the OT passage from Isaiah and the gospel from the Sermon on the Mount.

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 112

Matthew 5:13-20

1 Corinthians 12:1-16



If it is not already obvious, we live in a divided culture these days. Whatever else you might think of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, her motto "Stronger Together" did not seem to work out very well. Although it was not his *official* campaign slogan, the guy who won had a slogan that seemed to work better: "We're going to build a wall, and (I'll paraphrase), somebody else is going to pay for it!" In his inauguration speech, Donald Trump said repeatedly "America First!," which really means "Us First!," and obviously implies that someone else is not us, and has to be second. Racial divisions in the last couple of years have been marked by the two contrasting slogans "Black Lives Matter" and "All Lives Matter." Is it ironic that those claiming that "All Lives Matter" would not likely be caught dead holding a sign that read "Stronger Together"?

The problem of division is not a new problem. It has to do with the question of the "other." That is, what do we make of the person who is not like me, or the group that is not part of our group? It is also not the simple problem that slogans like "Stronger Together" or "Our Group First" would lead us to

believe.

This problem of group identity and group difference, of how we relate to the “other,” is a key theme in two of today’s lectionary readings: the Old Testament passage from Isaiah as well as the epistle reading from 1 Corinthians. Both passages deal with a discrepancy between the worship practice of the covenant community – either Israel or the church – and its actions; both have to do with the problem of the “other.” How do we as Israel or we as a church relate to those who are not members of our community, and how does or should this affect our worship?

The Old Testament passage begins with a problem: God’s people are seeking the LORD; they worship God; they do all the right religious things, yet God does not bless them. The people are suffering from despair because God has appeared to abandon them. Why? The prophet speaks on God’s behalf: “They ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’” (v. 3).

The prophet provides two reasons why God is not honoring Israel’s worship, and both have to do with Israel’s relationship with “the other.” First, Israel’s worship is marked by internal division: they quarrel and they fight with one another: “Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist.” (v. 4). Second, they neglect the other. Proper worship includes sharing one’s bread with the hungry, providing shelter for the homeless, and food for the hungry: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

The meaningful context for the passage is likely Isaiah 61:

1-2, where the prophet describes his mission: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn."

Israel's responsibility to the homeless poor and the hungry is directly related to the prophet's message as a whole. The message of Isaiah 40-66 is about God's deliverance of Israel from captivity in Babylon. Israel has been in captivity, and has suffered unjustly. God's righteous Servant has borne suffering and affliction, and so has Israel, but God has kept his promises and has delivered Israel from captivity. However, Israel's response is inconsistent with her current reality. Worship of the God who delivers Israel from suffering and captivity that does not include a corresponding mercy to those who suffer from homelessness and hunger is inconsistent with God's graciousness to Israel. Israel's identity is that of liberated outcasts – slaves delivered from captivity; yet in their worship, the nation has not been merciful and provided liberation to the outcasts in their midst.

The issue of division, difference, and otherness appears again in 1 Corinthians, but here the New Testament goes a bit further than the Old Testament because of something that has happened since Isaiah was written: the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. The main theme of the passage from 1 Cor. 12 is that of the unity of the church: The church is one because there is one Spirit; the church is one because it is the body of Christ, and Christ has only one body: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit."

1 Cor. 12 needs to be read in light of 1 Cor. 1:10-17. Paul

begins this first letter to the Corinthians by recounting divisions in the church; some at Corinth say that they are disciples of Paul, some that they are disciples of Apollos, and some that they are disciples of Jesus. This concern about division is a major theme throughout 1 Corinthians: divisions between rich and poor at the celebration of the Lord's Supper; worship practices concerned with gender distinctions between men and women having to do with either head coverings or hair styles. And now, in 1 Corinthians 12, there are divisions in worship caused by status distinctions based on spiritual gifts. Speaking in tongues has become a "status" indicator in the church's worship. The ultimate irony, of course, is that the Holy Spirit, who is supposed to be the source of the church's unity, is being used to justify division within the church. Some things never change.

The problem is again, that of how we relate to the other – here, not neglect of the other, but opposition to the other found in factionalism. Different groups within the church are jockeying for position over against each other based on whether or not they think God is using them in the context of worship. Note again, that as in the Isaiah passage, God's people are engaging in worship activity which is itself in contradiction to their identity as God's people, and the problem has to do with how they treat one another.

How does Paul address the issue of how we respond to the other? First, it is important to recognize that identity is crucial: Paul begins by making clear that the church has no identity in itself; our identity as church exists only in relationship to Jesus Christ who is the Lord of the church. "You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit." Paul's solution to division is not to advocate what the liberal church calls "inclusivism." Paul

does not say “We’re stronger together!” or even “All lives matter!” For Paul, the church has come out of the surrounding culture, and is distinct from the culture. The culture can provide no help in terms of establishing community because it has no stable basis for identity: “You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led.” The culture leads one way one moment, and another the next. As the gospel passage makes clear, the church is to be the salt which seasons the surrounding culture; the church is to be the light of the world. If salt has lost its flavor, how can it be salt? If the church is not distinct from the culture, how can it be the light which encourages the culture to praise the Father for our good deeds? If the church simply conforms to the surrounding culture, it is neither salt nor light.

Much of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians is against assimilation to the surrounding pagan culture, concerning such issues as sexuality, Christians engaging in lawsuits against one another, even concerning what kind of food they should eat, and whether they should eat with pagans. However, factionalism is as much of a problem as assimilation because factionalism also concerns a lack of proper identity – centering one’s identity in the wrong thing, one one’s own interests and pursuits rather than in Jesus Christ.

Paul’s solution to the problem of Christian factionalism is not simply to appeal to Jesus, but to appeal to Jesus in his moment of greatest humiliation; the solution to factionalism runs through the path of the cross. Paul famously writes in 1 Corinthians 1: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. . . . God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human

being might boast in the presence of God.”

Christian identity is thus found in the cross, not in our denominational distinctives, our theological heroes, not even in the superiority of our exegesis, or the size of our dogmatic tomes. The cross is the solution to our problems with factionalism, which are ultimately rooted in distrust of the “other” and pride, because the cross makes clear that God is not proud. On the cross, the God who created the world himself became the other; God took upon himself our distrust and suspicion of those who are not like us. In his death on the cross, the incarnate God came to his creation as one like ourselves, a fellow human being, “flesh of our flesh,” and human beings dealt with him as a stranger. By crucifying God incarnate, to use the words of Isaiah, we “hid from our own flesh,” but also from our Creator.

If the cross is God’s solution to the problem of human division based on alienation from the other, the church is the community that God has created to provide an alternative to communities that base their identity in cultural differences. The church does not find its identity in common ethnic or national loyalties in distinction from other ethnic groups or countries. The church does not even find its identity in intellectual brilliance. The church is not a philosophy. Rather, the church finds its identity in something (or rather someone) far more concrete and specific: a person, who has a physical body. The church is the body of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. As in the original creation story, Eve was taken from the side of Adam – flesh of his flesh – so the church was taken from the crucified Jesus Christ’s bleeding side to become both his body and his bride. As the Holy Spirit brooded over the waters in creation and gave life to humanity by breathing life into that first human being God created, so the Holy Spirit is now the love who has been sent by the risen Jesus Christ, and has been breathed into the church to join the church to Jesus Christ’s risen humanity so that we might

became the body of Christ and share in the eternal love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As God in Isaiah expected Israel to pattern its worship on the character of the God who had redeemed the people from bondage, so the church must pattern its life on that of the crucified Lord Jesus Christ. The church is not simply an identity group whose identity is determined by its difference from other social or cultural groups. Rather, the church is a "fellowship," a *koinonia*. Because we have been joined to Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection, our baptism in Christ creates one fellowship through the one Holy Spirit; the Church is one body as we receive one loaf and one cup in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. As God in Christ has given himself to us, so we therefore became able to give ourselves to one another. As Jesus Christ welcomed us when we were strangers, so we can welcome the stranger not as a stranger, but as another for whom Christ has died.

At the same time, the unity of the church does not mean simple conformity, but genuine unity in genuine difference. God values difference and diversity. As Paul writes, there is one body and one Spirit, but there are many members of that one body. All the members of the church are empowered by the one and the same Holy Spirit, but the Spirit apportions his gifts to each one individually as he wills (v. 11). If I could add an additional beatitude to the sermon on the mount, it would read something like this: "Blessed are the odd, because we're not all the same and God does not intend for us to be all the same."

That is, in short, God's solution to the problem of the divisions that seem so endemic to our culture right now, but, as Isaiah and 1 Corinthians make clear, are nothing new. In the incarnation, God in Jesus Christ has taken on the burdens of human estrangement and division on the cross. The church is God's community of reconciliation, but even the early church had to struggle with factions, so the solution is an ongoing

one. Things won't get better over-night.

That's perhaps all to the good, but where do we begin? How does this theology of the church as the body of Christ address the problems of the divided culture in which we live, especially when that culture seems less and less able to hear the message of God's solution to estrangement and division? I confess that I find myself tempted to despair of finding any pragmatic solutions to the culture's current divisions. But the following are just some suggestions.

First, we Christians should begin where we are. If the church is God's solution to the problem of division, then we need to begin with the church. The church is supposed to be that alternative community that lives a life of reconciliation. We begin by being reconciled to our fellow Christians. Those closest to us – to our families, to our roommates, to those we work with.

Second, in a culture that is rapidly losing touch with its Christian heritage, if the church is to be a community of reconciliation, it must be faithful to its cruciform identity. The culture would like us a lot more if the church were more willing to compromise on its creedal commitments to the Triune God, the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, the person and work of Jesus Christ. But what good news do we have to offer the culture if we cannot tell them that Jesus Christ died for their sins – even if they don't want to hear it? If salt has lost its flavor, what good is it?

Third, cultural and partisan divisions in the church need to be distinguished from genuine theological differences. There really is such a thing as heresy, and orthodox historic Christianity has always claimed that heresy is genuine grounds for division. Having said that, while separation from heresy is not the same as schism, not all church divisions concern heresy. Church divisions that really reflect different socio-economic status or race, different national or geographical

histories, or even indifferent theological disagreements, are scandalous.

Fourth, the church's theology and worship needs to be ecumenical. To be Evangelical means to be Catholic, and to be Catholic means to be Evangelical. Confessionally orthodox Christians from different confessional traditions need one another, and we need to learn from one another – not only from different expressions of Christian faith (that is, other denominations), but also from Christians of other cultures. Affluent Western Christians, in particular, need to listen to the voices of Christians from the global South and from Asia.

Speaking of worship, worship is not enough. I enthusiastically endorse Jamie Smith's books, and I agree about the significance of liturgical worship as a crucial element in spiritual formation. However, as the readings from both Isaiah and 1 Corinthians make clear, we can sing the right hymns, share a common lectionary, follow the proper rubrics, and still miss the point. Worship that does not welcome the "other" is bad worship. Worship that does not care for the poor is bad worship. Worship that does not include those who are unlike us is bad worship.

So even as the church retains its identity, the church needs to embrace genuine diversity and difference. We should welcome the different, the misfits, even those who are somewhat peculiar. In North America, the Evangelical church tends to resemble a social club for middle-class comfortable white America. Do we welcome poor people in our churches? Where are the unemployed and the less well-off? Where are the non-conformists, the creative artists, the oddballs?

Finally, when it comes to those outside the church's walls, the church's identity should be that of mission, not isolation. If the temptation of the liberal church is toward cultural accommodation, the temptation of the orthodox church seems more and more toward that of circling the wagons. While

I am sympathetic to what has come to be called the Benedict option, I think what we really need is a Dominican option. The church's message to the culture really is good news. We live in a culture full of estranged people, people who do not trust one another, and are not sure whether anyone can be trusted. If the church really were to begin to live out the life of hospitality and reconciliation that is at the heart of the gospel, to really welcome the stranger, we might be surprised to discover that the stranger would like to be welcomed.

Defeat, Shame, Memory: A Sermon

Lamentations 1:1-6

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Psalm 137

Luke 17:5-10



This morning's lectionary readings contain two of the most difficult passages in all of Scripture. How does the preacher respond to a passage in which the final verse reads "Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock"? (Ps. 137: 9). Certainly the preacher cannot suggest that this is an example to be emulated? "As we go forth this morning, let us remember these words from our Psalm: 'Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and . . .' Uh, Never mind. Let us stand and say the words of the Nicene Creed." Turning to the Lamentations passage does not

make things any easier. Lamentations is probably the most depressing book in the entire Bible. At least the book of Job has a happy ending! There are lots of thoughtful commentaries and theological reflections on the Book of Job. Not so much on Lamentations. Can you imagine someone saying to a seminary student on the day of graduation "Congratulations! I'd like you to give you this commentary on the book of Lamentations to help you with your ministry"?

When we come across passages like this in Scripture, I think it helps to remember that the Bible is not a book, but a collection of books. The Bible does not speak with a single voice, but with many voices. I think it also helps to remember that these are voices in a dialogue. Voices in Scripture ask questions to which sometimes we have to turn to other passages in Scripture to hear the answers. I think that reading the Bible in this way is preferable to the kind of static view that imagines Scripture as a kind of database of theological propositions all of which are speaking with a single voice and saying the same thing. I think it is also preferable to the opposite view that says that the Bible is full of contradictions and so we can pick and choose what we like. Neither approach gives us a clue as to how the church might derive theological or spiritual insight from passages like this morning's readings.

So I would ask my listeners this morning to hear the morning's lectionary readings as voices in a dialogue. I am going to focus on three readings: the Psalm, the Lamentations reading, and the epistle reading from 2 Timothy. I would suggest that it is helpful to read each of these passages as asking the single question "Where is God?"

I also find it helpful to notice that there is a common pattern of themes in all three passages: defeat, shame, and remembering. I am going to use this three-fold pattern as a clue to hearing the dialogue between the voices in this

morning's readings.

Biblical scholars sometimes have difficulty deciding the historical setting of a particular passage of Scripture: When and where was it written? There is no such problem with the Psalm and Lamentations passages. Both were clearly written some time after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and during the period of the Babylonian captivity, the exile of Judah sometime between 587 and 539 B.C. The Psalm was clearly written by a Jewish exile in Babylon itself: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept." (Ps. 137: 1) Lamentations was written by someone who was left behind in Jerusalem, but who did not go into exile: "How lonely sits the city that was full of people. . . . Judah has gone into exile because of affliction . . . From the daughter of Zion all her majesty has departed." (Lam. 1:1, 3, 6)

The Psalm passage describes a setting of defeat. The Psalmist is in captivity in a foreign land: "By the waters of Babylon, we sat down . . . How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Ps. 137:1, 4), This is a Psalm of lament, of which there are many in the Psalter, but it is not simply a lament, but a Psalm of absolute defeat. This is not just failure, but the worst kind of failure, absolute defeat by an enemy. This is ultimate failure because the defeat is irreversible. The Psalmist is one of those who has been force-marched from the city of Jerusalem to Babylon, a distance of about 500 miles, walked by foot. There is no going back. The Psalmist knows that he or she will never see home again.

The humility of the defeat is accompanied by shame, our second theme. The defeat is not simply devastating but shameful because it is accompanied by the kind of mocking that successful conquerors love to impose on those they have conquered: "For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormenters mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'" (Ps. 137:3) Put yourself in the place of this writer and imagine his or her sense of total helplessness and

humiliation. Not only have you and everyone you know been defeated, but your enemy rubs salt into your wounds by reminding you not only that you have been defeated, but how all of your hopes have been crushed. You will never see your home again, but, hey, says your enemy, "Why don't you sing us one of those old songs that will remind you of that home you'll never see again?"

This leads to the third theme of remembrance. Remembering adds to the pain of defeat: "There we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion." (Ps. 137:1) But in spite of the pain, remembering is the only thing that still ties the Psalmist to his home, and so he forces himself to remember: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you!" (v. 5)

Finally, the theme of remembering comes up one more time as the Psalmist turns to prayer. "If I can remember Jerusalem," she prays, surely God should do the same. "Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, 'Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!'" (Ps. 137:7) And the Psalmist appeals to God for justice. One bad turn deserves another. What goes around comes around. Let's have some instant karma! "O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us." (v. 8) Finally, there is the chilling conclusion. Blessed is the one who kills your children in the same way that you killed ours. And we know from history that the Babylonians were cruel. They did indeed kill men, women, and children in horrific ways.

From our safe setting, it is easy to be horrified by the Psalmist's prayer, but I think it is also important to remind ourselves that what we see in this Psalm is a kind of natural response to great injustice. When people are abused, when everything they have is taken away from them, they naturally respond with a plea for justice. If there is justice in the

universe, such horrible injustice cannot be allowed to stand. The Psalmist is defeated, and he has no hope for his own future. But his answer to the question, "Where is God?," is that God is just, and a just God must punish the wicked by giving them what they deserve.

The same three themes appear in the Lamentations passage. Again, there is the theme of defeat by ruthless enemies "Judah has gone into exile . . . she dwells among the nations, but finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress." (Lam. 1:3) Throughout the passage, there are images of reversal: The city that was full of people is now lonely; the princess has become a slave; Jerusalem's friends have become her enemies. And there is again, the theme of the loss of children: "Her children have gone away, captives before the foe." (v. 5)

As in the Psalmist, there is the theme of shame in the presence of gloating by the enemy. Verses 7 and 8 read: "When her people fell into the hand of her foe, and there was none to help her, her foes gloated over her; they mocked at her downfall. . . . all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans and turns her face away." It is one thing to suffer in silence, but suffering is made worse when your enemies mock you, and even your friends who used to honor you, now turn their backs on you in disgust.

The theme of remembering appears again, but it is different in Lamentations. On the one hand, there is the remembrance of better times: Verse 7 reads "Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction and wandering all the precious things that were hers from days of old." Suffering is made worse because we remember when things were better. And, unlike Job which has a happy ending, the book of Lamentations ends with its own answer to the question "Where is God?" Does God remember? The last verses of Lamentations read "But you, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations. Why do you

forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days?" (Lam. 5:19-20) As with the Psalmist, the writer of Lamentations wants God to act, but what if he does not? "Restore us to yourself, O Lord that we may be restored! . . . unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us." (vs. 21-22) What if the answer to the question "Where is God?" is that God is gone? What if God is no longer with us at all?

However, even in the Old Testament, the dialogue does not end here. In Isaiah 40-66, there is an answer to the question "Where is God in exile?" It becomes clear that God does remember as he leads his people back to Jerusalem from exile, and he reminds his people to remember who they are and who he is: "Remember these things O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you; you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me." (Is. 44:21) After the exile, it becomes clear that God does remember, but the Psalmist and the writer of Lamentations did not live to see it. Nonetheless, even during the exile, through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the Lord had already given hope even to those in exile. Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant (Jer. 31:31), and Ezekiel speaks of a time when God will breath life into dead bones (Ez. 37).

I turn now to the passage from 2 Timothy. It is easy to forget when we read this passage that it is written from a position of defeat because Paul's opening is so positive: "I thank God, whom I serve," he writes to Timothy, "as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day." (2 Tim. 1:3) Paul writes, "I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy." (v. 4) But Paul too has been completely and absolutely defeated by his enemies. He writes from a prison cell. In verse 8, he describes himself as the Lord's "prisoner," and speaks of sharing in suffering. Paul's position becomes clear in verse 15. He has been abandoned by his friends: "You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me . . ." In

his concluding paragraphs, Paul speaks of abandonment by a friend: "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." (2 Tim. 4:10) Paul writes that "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm. . . . he strongly opposed our message." (v. 14) Paul writes about his trial, "At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me." (v. 16) When Paul was on trial for his very life, those whom he thought were his friends abandoned him, possibly to die alone. He writes to Timothy "Do your best to come before winter," and "When you come, bring the cloak . . . and also the books, and above all the parchments." (vs. 13, 21) New Testament scholar James Dunn suggests that these might well be Paul's last written words. We imagine an old man, alone in a jail cell, shivering with cold, asking for Timothy to bring his cloak before winter so that he can keep himself warm, along with some reading material to help pass the time until the inevitable end.

These are circumstances that would discourage anyone, and the theme of shame appears again. The ancient Mediterranean world was a shame/honor culture, and to face imprisonment and death was certainly grounds for humiliation and shame. Even worse, these foolish Christians followed someone who had himself met his death in the most shameful and humiliating way, public execution by crucifixion. So Paul writes to Timothy, "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God." (2 Tim. 1:8) But there is a twist here; Paul counters shame by actually encouraging Timothy to embrace the suffering that accompanies it.

We conclude with the final theme: the theme of remembrance. How does Paul, in his own situation of what by contemporary Mediterranean standards was his moment of greatest defeat, respond? By remembering. Paul writes to Timothy, "As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith . . ." (2 Tim.

1:4) He counsels Timothy to remember as well: "I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God . . ." (v. 6) And, finally, Paul himself remembers: "I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me." (v. 12) In the midst of Paul's suffering, humiliation, and shame, he is able to experience joy and confidence because he remembers something about the God in whom he has believed. And what is it that Paul remembers? He remembers the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ. By the power of God, Paul writes, he "saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which has now been manifested through the appearance of our Savior Jesus Christ who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (vs. 8-10) In the midst of defeat by his enemies and abandonment by his friends, in the shame and the suffering of imprisonment, facing the prospect of approaching death, Paul is not ashamed, because he remembers that Jesus Christ's shameful death on a cross did not end with shame, but with the abolition of death itself.

One does not want to be superficial in comparing examples of suffering. However, if we situate Paul in the dialogue between our passages this morning, I think it plausible to claim that while Paul shared with the writers of the two OT passages an initial situation of defeat by enemies along with its accompanying shame, Paul's answer to the question "Where is God?" is different because Paul remembers something different. The Psalmist remembers that God is just and so prays that the just God will enforce justice. The writer of Lamentations remembers that God reigns, and his throne is eternal. However, in light of the destruction of Jerusalem, there is concern that God perhaps no longer remembers his people.

What makes Paul's memory different is something that has happened, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The

cross provides its own paradoxical answer to the problem of defeat with its accompanying shame, and the question of memory that arises, "Where is God?" For the Romans, crucifixion was the worst shame and defeat possible for a human being. It was the most degrading punishment that they could imagine. And yet the resurrection of Jesus means that God in Christ has defeated even that most shameful and humiliating defeat. Where is God in the crucifixion of Jesus? The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ means that God is present even in the humiliating defeat of death. Jesus of Nazareth came to a Jewish nation that was in exile in its own land; the Romans had defeated and ruled over the Jewish people every bit as much as the Babylonians had defeated them earlier. And yet, in the crucifixion and resurrection of his Son Jesus, the God of Israel used the worst that this enemy conqueror could throw at him to utterly defeat death, the worst enemy of all. In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote: "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor. 1:23-24) In this morning's passage, we read that our Savior Jesus Christ "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (2 Tim. 1:10) This is what Paul remembered. Even though Paul was a prisoner, and eventually would die at the hands of the enemy conqueror, he did not lose hope, he was not ashamed, because he remembered this.

What then should we remember? We should remember that like Israel in exile, and like Paul in prison, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, we are aliens who live in exile. As strangers in a culture that more and more has forgotten the God of Christian faith, we may discover that we have enemies, as Israel did and as did Paul. And those enemies may defeat us. But even if that kind of large scale defeat never happens, I can guarantee that at some point in our lives or in our ministries, we will encounter other kinds of suffering, and other disappointments. As Demas abandoned Paul, we may be

abandoned even by those whom we love and care for. Even worse, we may discover to our own chagrin and shame, that we ourselves have abandoned or betrayed others. No serious Christian wants to be the kind of person who would lead someone to pray the kind of prayer for justice we read in today's Psalm passage. But we might be that person! It is in those moments of defeat and shame and guilt that we are called to remember the defeat and shame of the cross, and to remember that on the cross, God was with us in Christ, and he has defeated shame and death, and he has taken upon himself our guilt and shame, and the guilt even of our worst enemies who have defeated and shamed us. As Jesus forgave the enemies who crucified him, so we are free to forgive even as God in Christ has forgiven us when we were his enemies. In the cross of Christ, God is always with us, and he will never abandon us. Remember that and have hope.

[Abounding in Thanksgiving: A Sermon on Prayer](#)

Genesis 18:20-33
Psalm 138
Colossians 2:6-15
Luke 11:1-13



This morning's lectionary readings focus on prayer. The Genesis passage continues the story of three travelers who visit Abraham and promise that he will have a son. One of the visitors is identified to be God, and Abraham has a discussion with God. In fact, Abraham actually argues with God; he haggles with him like someone in a Middle Eastern market. In the Psalm (as in many Psalms), we have a specific example of a prayer: "I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart . . . I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name." (Ps. 138: 1-2) In the gospel reading, Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray in Luke's version of the Lord's prayer; the next paragraph in Luke contains Jesus' well known promise about prayer: "And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." (Luke 11:9-10)

In my sermon this morning, I am going to try to answer the question, "What is prayer?" I am going to begin, however, with three examples of misunderstandings of prayer to help make clear what prayer is not.

The first is an objection to prayer that began with the New Atheists and often appears in the comments section on the internet when unbelievers want to make fun of people of faith. Atheist commenters regularly accuse Christians of having an "imaginary friend." The point is that prayer is something childish that an adult should have grown out of. Belief in a God who answers our prayers is like the boy Calvin in the old

comic strip Calvin and Hobbes whose stuffed toy tiger was his imaginary friend.

The second approach views prayer as a philosophical problem. People ask: "If God knows everything and if God is going to do what he intends to do anyway, then what is the point of prayer? Surely we cannot change God's mind?" Prayer, then, becomes, not something we do, but a philosophical problem about how we bring together God's almighty power and human freedom.

The third approach is that of the prosperity gospel. The claim is made that if we have enough faith, God will answer our prayers. We will never be sick. We will never be poor. If we become sick, if we are poor, it must be because we do not have enough faith.

Each one of these approaches is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what prayer is, and the best way to correct misunderstandings is to offer a proper understanding. For a proper understanding of prayer, we can look at the one passage in our readings that only mentions prayer in three words, "abounding in thanksgiving." In his epistle to the Colossians, the apostle Paul writes: "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." (Col. 2:6-7) This is an example of what biblical scholars call Paul's "indicative-imperative." Since God has done this in Christ; therefore, you should do that.

Although "indicative-imperative" is a kind of technical term for biblical scholars, there is nothing mysterious about the idea. It is just a way of saying that Paul understands there to be a relationship between knowledge and practice. What we do depends on what we know. Recently, the Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith has written a book entitled *You Are What You Love*. Smith's point is that the things we do show what we love more than the things that we claim to know.

There's a great example in 1 John 3:17. John asks: "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" If we say that we love God, but we don't show it by how we treat people, we really don't love God.

But I would add that, while it is true that we do what we love, it is also true that we cannot love what we do not know. So the New Atheist does not pray because he believes that he has outgrown the god who is an imaginary friend. The New Atheist looks at the universe and he says that the lights may be on, but there's nobody home. Or maybe the lights are not even on. The Christian looks at the universe, however, and he says the lights are on, and we know that someone is home because Jesus is the light. Paul writes: "as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him," and "For in him," meaning, in Christ, "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority." (Col. 2:9-10) We Christians know that there is someone at home in the universe because that someone has actually paid us a visit. God has become one of us in Jesus Christ.

What then is prayer? Prayer is living in the world as if we believe that there really is a God and that God has done certain things. Prayer is living as if there is someone at home in the universe. Prayer is our response to how God in his goodness has acted in Jesus Christ. It is how we walk as we have received Christ.

But prayer is also an action. It is something we do. It is not simply believing certain things or having the right doctrines. (And that is where Jamie Smith is right when he says that "You Are What You Love.") "Walk" is a verb suggesting that the Christian life is a journey. The image is one of pilgrimage. We have a destination. We have a goal. We have a starting place and a path, and Jesus Christ is the starting place, the path, and the goal. But we actually have to take steps, to put

one foot in front of the other. So prayer is a kind of shorthand way of describing the Christian journey. There are other things we do besides prayer: Worship, sacraments, acts of mercy, but, in a sense, all of Christian life is prayer.

And this is where all three of the misunderstandings I mention get it wrong. Prayer is not, like the New Atheists think, about having an imaginary friend. Prayer is living as if there is someone home in the universe because that Someone has come to us in Jesus Christ. Prayer is not a philosophical problem about whether our prayers can change God's mind. It is rather what the apostle Paul calls a walk, walking in Christ, "rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." Finally, prayer is not magic, as the prosperity gospel preachers seem to think. Prayer is not a relationship with Santa Claus, but a call to follow Jesus Christ, and that will mean taking up a cross. When we assume that prayer means that God should answer all of our requests, we need to remember that Jesus Christ prayed in the garden of Gethsemane that the cup of suffering would pass him by, and it didn't. Not even the incarnate Son of God had all of his prayers answered.

If prayer is an imperative – Do this! – what are the indicatives? What the Bible tells us about who God is and what he has done tells us why and how we should pray.

First, prayer is an acknowledgment that we are not alone, and that we are made for someone and something. At the beginning of his Confessions, St. Augustine wrote: "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Even here, once again, when we talk about creation, it is Jesus Christ who is at the center. Earlier in the letter to the Colossians from which we read this morning, Paul wrote: "He (that is, Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created

through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”(Col. 1:15-17) As John’s gospel puts it: “All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” (John 1:3). So we live in a world that God has created, and he has created it through Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of God who became flesh as one of us.

All of our texts tell us something about this God who has created the world and created us – that God is good and he cares for his creatures. In Abraham’s argument with God in Genesis 18, he asks a fundamental question to which the answer is supposed to be self-evident: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen. 18:24) In the Psalm, we find a word which is one of the characteristic ways in which the Bible describes God, the Hebrew word *hesed*, which English Bibles translate as “loving kindness” or “steadfast love”: “I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness. . . . The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.” (Ps. 138:2, 8) In the gospel reading, Jesus asks “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13) In the next chapter in Luke’s gospel, we read Luke’s version of material that we also find in Matthew’s sermon on the Mount: “And [Jesus] said to his disciples, ‘Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! . . . Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith!’” (Luke 12:24-28) If the Creator of all things cares for birds and flowers and grass, he certainly cares for us.

Second, the texts speak of what theologians call providence. God not only has created the world, but he is in charge of the world. He knows what he is doing, and, in the end, he is going to make things right. The Psalmist writes, "For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life . . . The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands." (Ps. 138:6-8) In the Lord's prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray that God's kingdom will come, and his will should be done (Luke 11:2; cf. Matt. 6:10).

Third, Paul's letter to the Colossians tell us that this God who has created the world and watches over it and us, has redeemed us in Jesus Christ. This redemption is good news and not bad news. God himself has come among us in Christ. Paul writes that in him dwells the fulness of God, but we also have come to share in Christ's fulness. Paul writes that we have been buried with Christ in baptism, that we have been raised with Christ through faith in his resurrection, that when we were dead in our sins, God made us alive in Christ and forgave us our sins (Col. 2:9-13). Who we are – our identity – thus flows from our union with Christ. We are people whose sins are forgiven and who have new life because we are united to Christ in his death and resurrection.

Our temptation is to find our identity elsewhere, and that is why Paul warns us of the dangers of being held captive by what he calls philosophy and empty deceit. We live in a world in which the culture of consumerism attempts to fill our infinite hunger for the God who has made us for himself with baubles and trinkets – with all kinds of "stuff" that will, in the end, leave us hungry. As Augustine says, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." The empty promises of contemporary culture cannot compete with this one Jew from Nazareth in whom the fulness of Deity dwells. The false promises of our culture cannot give us something that can

satisfy our infinite desire for love because only an infinite God who loves us infinitely can do that, and our culture only believes in the kinds of small things that can be sold by advertising. Contemporary culture can not believe in a God who loves us infinitely, or in a world that was created by love.

These then are the indicatives. These are the reasons that it makes sense to pray. God loves us and created us. God cares for us and watches over us. God has redeemed us in Christ. What then are the imperatives? In light of the above, what should be our response? While volumes could be and have been written, I am going to mention three aspects of prayer that correspond to the three points I made above.

Our first response should be gratitude. The Psalmist writes: "I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart," and later, "All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth." (Ps. 138:1,4) Paul writes that we should "abound in thanksgiving." (Col. 2:7). Prayer is the recognition that we are creatures and depend on God, that everything we have is a gift from God. Prayer is saying "Thank you" to a God who created us, who has given us our life and all the good things in our lives, and who has loved us and gave himself for us in Jesus Christ.

Second, prayer is a recognition of our dependence on God. Because everything we have comes from God, prayer is the recognition that we can trust God and so can depend on him to meet our needs. So after thanksgiving, prayer consists of trust and petition. The Psalmist prays: "On the day I called, you answered me," and "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me." (Ps. 138:3, 7) In the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, he teaches us to pray "Give us each day our daily bread." (Luke 11:3) Jesus reminds us that if our child asked us for an egg, we would not give him a scorpion. If we care enough for our children to give them good things, certainly we can depend on

our heavenly Father to care for us just as much (Luke 11: 11-13). In 1 Peter 5:7, we are told to "Cast all of your cares upon the Lord, for he cares for you." This does not mean that nothing bad will ever happen to us. It does mean that in a world that is filled with troubles, we can trust that God is in charge and he knows what he is about. As Paul writes in Romans, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" And again, there are Paul's familiar words, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28, 32-32)

Finally, prayer is confession of sin. In the Lord's prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive as we forgive everyone who is indebted to us." (Luke 11:4) This is perhaps the hardest part of prayer for contemporary culture to understand. The reason, I think, is that there has been a shift in modern culture from a culture of guilt to a culture of shame. Guilt is an acknowledgment of wrong-doing, that someone has done something objectively wrong that really hurts other people. Shame, however, is not about objective wrong-doing, but about cultural disapproval. Shame is not so much about something we have done as about something we are. The current culture rejects language of sin because they think sin language is about cultural shaming, and no one wants to be shamed. At the same time, our culture is one where people constantly shame each other. That is perhaps why there seems to be so much anger these days. Everyone shames, but no one wants to be shamed. With shame, there can never be forgiveness.

An important part of prayer is confession of sin, but confession flows out of forgiveness; it is not a condition of forgiveness. The gospel offers us forgiveness, not shame. Paul writes, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with

him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him." (Col. 2:13-15) In a culture of shame, forgiveness is good news because it can set aside our guilt. Forgiveness saves shame for those internal and external voices that would continue to condemn us, but no longer can because we have died and risen with Christ. In a culture of shame, it is good news to know that the God who created the world, who loves us, who watches over us, who cares for us, has taken upon himself in the cross of Christ all of those things about which we might rightly or wrongly feel shame. Confession is good news because it is good news to no longer have to bear the weight of guilt and shame.

So these are the three main tasks of prayer: gratitude, trust, confession. And prayer is the action that follows from the three things we know about what God has done for us: that the good God has created us and given us all things as a gift; that God cares for us, watches over us, and works all things for our good; that God has redeemed us in Christ, and delivered us from all that can condemn or accuse us. But at the same time, do not forget. Prayer is an action; it is something that we need to do. It is not enough to know that we should be grateful, that we should trust God for what we need, that we should confess our sins. Prayer is a pilgrimage. Prayer is a journey in which we must put one foot in front of the other. As Paul writes, "as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him." As we leave this building this morning, let us take seriously the words of the post-communion prayer: "And we humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honor and glory, world without end. Amen."

The King in a Manger: An Advent Sermon

Micah 5:2-5

Psalm 80

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-56



Every generation has its crises, and my generation certainly had its share. I grew up on the tail end of the baby boom, and here are some of the things I remember from my childhood: the assassination of a president and his brother. The murders of black people with names like Emmet Till and of three civil rights workers in Mississippi. The burnings of black churches, and police dogs turned loose and fire hoses opened up on black marchers. The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Riots in Watts, Los Angeles. A decade long war in Southeast Asia, and students burning draft cards

and chanting "hell, no, we won't go." Videos of soldiers and helicopters and machine gun fire in the jungle, and coffins wrapped in flags on the news every night. Students shot dead by national guards troops at Kent State, Ohio. A president who resigned from office in disgrace.

Looking back on all of this, it is quite surprising to think about the kinds of songs that we heard on the radio at the time. Despite deep divisions in the culture, and crisis after crisis that was truly depressing, some of the most popular songs were filled with hope: songs with lyrics like "What the world needs now is love, sweet love." "This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, Harmony and understanding, Sympathy and trust abounding." "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony." This was not just the left wing hippie counter-culture either. There was a singing group called "Up With People," who were the short-hair polyester-slacks wearing alternative, but the message was the same – despite all of the bad news that was going on in the culture, there was hope for a better future. This optimism lasted for a couple of decades. As late as 1985, a huge group of popular singers got together to sing about the "world coming together as one" in a charity raising video called "We are the world."

It would be hard to imagine anything like this optimism in contemporary popular culture. Ever since terrorists drove two airplanes into the World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001 and the economy collapsed in 2008, there has been a massive cultural shift. If there is a single mood that dominates culture today, it would seem to be that of fear. 1 John states that "perfect love casts out fear," but the converse is true as well. Perfect fear casts out love. And as fear dominates, so does mistrust, and people are divided. In the 1960's, polls indicated that about 5% of the populace would have been uncomfortable if their grown-up children were to marry someone who voted for the other political party. In modern polls, that number has risen to about 50%. In recent weeks, the news has

been dominated on the one hand by stories about presidential candidates promising to build huge walls to keep out immigrants and promising to ban Muslims from visiting the United States, and, on the other, of hundreds of students at Yale University marching to demand the firing of a faculty member who defended the right to free speech. The Rev. Jerry Fallwell, Jr., President of Liberty University, recently told his students that they needed to arm themselves as he pointed to the gun he carried in his own back pocket. We seem to be a nation that has lost hope for the future. In place of the traditional theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, the culture seems to have embraced what might be called the atheological vices of fear, distrust, and mutual anger.

There is a Christian alternative to this, literally, thank God. We find it in the Old Testament reading from Micah and the gospel reading this morning.

Micah is one of the supremely neglected books in the Old Testament. Micah is known primarily for two passages – Micah 4:3, which speaks of a time when nations “will beat their swords into plowshares” – and Micah 5:2 (this morning’s passage), the prophecy about a ruler who will come from the town of Bethlehem, which is cited in Matt. 2:6 as referring to the place of Jesus’ birth. But Micah is a lot more than these two passages. The historical prophet Micah was contemporary with the prophet Isaiah, and Micah includes themes that have a lot in common with the book of Isaiah: sin and forgiveness, the uselessness of sacrifice without justice, the notion of a faithful remnant. Perhaps the two central themes in the book of Micah are those of divine judgment and hope for the future, and these are placed side by side in a manner that so confuses scholars that many of them suggest that the book of Micah as we have it must be a composite work. Would it make sense for the same historical prophet to simultaneously preach a message of divine judgment and a message of hope?

Regardless of the speculations of scholars, in the canonical

book as we have it, passages about judgment and hope occur side by side. Theologically, I think that this makes sense. This morning's passage, which Christians often read as a rather straightforward prophecy about the birth of Jesus, is a prime example. The context of the passage begins in the previous verse, which was not read in the lectionary, and speaks of judgment: "Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid upon us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel on the cheek." Verse 11 of the previous chapter, speaks of "many nations" gathered against Zion or Jerusalem. The context of the passage is that Jerusalem's enemies have been gathered against her, and intend to destroy the city. Jerusalem is under siege, and it has reached the point where Israel's enemies have physically struck the ruler of the people in the face with a rod.

Immediately following this description of complete humiliation, Micah tells of another ruler, who will not be humiliated. This ruler is a king in the style of King David. He comes from Bethlehem, David's home town. This new ruler will turn the situation around completely. As the young David was a shepherd, so this ruler will "feed his flock," his people, the remnant, composed not of the powerful of the nation, but the weakest. Micah writes in chapter 4, "In that day, declares the Lord, I will assemble the lame, and gather those who have been driven away and those whom I have afflicted, and the lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off a strong nation, and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from this time forth and forevermore" (4:6-7). Not only that, but this new David will be the ruler not only of the remnant of Judah, but apparently also of the lost northern kingdom of Israel that had previously gone into exile – "the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel" (5:3). Under the reign of this Davidic ruler, the current hopeless condition of Zion will be completely reversed. While the people of Judah are currently threatened by their enemies, they will finally live in security. The new

ruler will bring them “peace.”

We have to say that, as a prophecy to the historical nation of Israel, this passage has not been fulfilled, at least not yet, at least not as it was likely understood at the time. Many Israelites did return from exile, but not all. There never was a new king like David who brought about the hoped-for peace and stability.

This leads us to the gospel passage, and particularly to Mary’s prayer, known traditionally as the Magnificat, a prayer that has been recited traditionally in the Evening Office of the church – vespers if you are Roman Catholic or Lutheran, Evening Prayer if you are an Anglican. The political situation at the time of Jesus’ birth was similar to that of the time in which Micah wrote his book. Since their return from exile in Babylon, the Jewish people had been living in their land, but they had struggled from the beginning with opposition, and found themselves the victims of war, and ruled by their enemies. The Maccabees defeated the invading Greeks, but their dynasty turned out to be rather a disappointment. They were certainly not the Davidic rulers. The pagan Romans were the current bunch of bullies in charge, along with their puppet king, the half-Jewish Herod, who had done anything but bring peace, justice, and stability.

We find in Mary’s prayer an echo of the themes we have already seen in Micah. First, there is a contrast between judgment and hope. The Lord – he who is mighty – “has done great things” (Luke 1:49). He has exercised judgment by casting down the mighty from their thrones, while he has offered hope by looking on the humble estate of his servant (1:52,48). Through the promise given to her, Mary sees herself in continuity with similar promises given to prophets such as Micah: “He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever” (1:54,55).

There is, as in Micah, a reversal of fortunes. The powerful – the oppressors – have been cast down and the humble exalted – “he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things” (1:52). There is the promise of God’s mercy to a “remnant community” – “His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation” (1:50).

And, finally, there is a new Davidic King, who will fulfill the hopes of prophets such as Micah. When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary at the Annunciation, he tells Mary that she will bear a child, “who will be called Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (1:32-33).

Of course, the central themes of the Magnificat, and, of the entire gospel narratives, are intentionally ironic. This new King who is supposed to rule from the throne of his ancestor David, is a baby whom Luke tells us was born in a manger, a cattle trough, because the only hotel in the small town of Bethlehem was flashing a “no vacancy” sign. No one except for a few shepherds seems to have noticed this baby at all (2:1-20). When we read the parallel account of Jesus’ birth in the gospel of Matthew, we find that when the traveling magi checked in with King Herod, he responded to their quote from this morning’s passage from Micah about a king who would bring security and peace to the Jewish people, by having all the babies in Bethlehem killed – just to make sure that no such king would ever do any such thing (Matt. 2:1-12).

When Jesus spoke to his followers about his own understanding of leadership, he contrasted the leadership of this world with what he expected of his disciples: “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves” (Luke

22:25-27).

The gospels tell us just how successful this son of Mary was in bringing down the mighty from their thrones. One of the mighty himself, Pontius Pilate, questioned Jesus: "Are you the king of the Jews?" (Luke 23:3). Pilate made a point of showing Jesus who was really in charge, by having him nailed to a cross on which was written the sarcastic charge, "This is the King of the Jews" (Luke 23:38). And, of course, the witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion enjoyed this supreme irony with the kind of biting cruelty that reminds us that what happens on social media these days is nothing new: "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself" (23:37).

Of course, we know how the story turns out because we know about Easter Sunday. The resurrection of Jesus is the supreme reversal of fortune. By raising Jesus from the dead, his Father did indeed "scatter the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." He exalted the one who was of humble estate, and acknowledged him as the king who is like David, the one who will shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord. The risen Jesus fulfilled the promise to Abraham and his descendants by creating a community of followers who are to rule by being servants of one another, and not by imitating rulers like Herod or Pilate. The risen Lord Jesus Christ, the one who is anointed with God's Spirit as David was anointed with oil, has filled the hungry with good things; he is the bread of life; those who come to him shall not hunger, and whoever believes in him will not thirst. Those who eat his flesh and drink his blood enjoy true food and true drink, and, as he has promised, he will raise them up on the last day (John 6:35, 53-58).

So what does this story about a crucified and risen Davidic king have to do with the fear that dominates our current culture? We can speculate that the culture is so fearful because its hopes have been disappointed. All the singing about the dawning of the Age of Aquarius and harmony and understanding brought about nothing more wonderful than people

having to stand in long lines and take off their shoes before they can get on an airplane. "I'd like to teach the world to sing" has been replaced by worries about whether or not some illegal immigrant might be taking my job, and worries about whether or not these refugees might really be terrorists.

But the church does not need to fear these things because the church has not placed its hope in saviors who cannot save. We, at least, are not supposed to place our faith in earthly rulers, either kings like Herod or American politicians who repeatedly make promises they never deliver. We place our faith in the king who was born in a manger. We can also trust because we can afford to be patient. We await in hope for a king whose promises are secure, and we know that he can keep his promises because he has already defeated the greatest threat to any promises— death. And because we do not need to fear death, we do not need to fear anything, or anyone.

Our loyalty is also to another community – not any political or social movement or identity group, but the church which is Christ's body because we are united to the risen Christ through sharing in his body and blood. This is a community which has been founded on trust, not fear, and which can be content to be powerless because we realize that death has been defeated by resurrection. We are called not to rule, not to try to make things turn out right, but to serve one another, as the king who was born in a manger became a servant for us. We are the servant subjects of a king who ruled from a cross.

As an aside, I think that this has significant implications for how Christians should think about politics. For the last generation, we have seen Christians losing our status in the culture as post-modernity has replaced Christendom. Conservative Christians fought back against this by attempting to use Caesar's weapons to fight the church's battles. We lost the "culture wars," and we lost badly. At least one way in which Christians have responded to this loss is to echo the same kind of anger and mistrust that is currently

characteristic of the culture as a whole. If you google the words "Why are Christians . . ." the top "autocomplete" is "Why are Christians so mean?" We need to re-think what it means to be the humble servants of the God whose service, as the Collect from the Book of Common Prayer puts it, is "perfect freedom."

This does not mean that everything is going to be "all right," that nothing bad can happen to us, at least not this side of the eschaton. We place our hopes in a crucified ruler, and Jesus has made clear that to follow him means to take up his cross. The New Testament scholar, Michael Gorman, has summarized what it means to be a disciple of Christ in the handy word "cruciformity."

This also means that the way that the church governs itself cannot simply follow the business success models of the culture around us. Ayn Rand and Jeff Bezos and Steve Jobs are the last role models that the church should emulate. Jesus really did call us to be servants of one another. This does not mean that we will never be disappointed even in that community who are supposed to be servant disciples of Jesus – the church. Far from it. For two thousand years, Christians have often looked more like Herod and Pilate than Jesus, even in the way that we treat one another. Even in churches, even in seminaries, there are going to be times when we will be hurt and disappointed. Some wag once said that you can find out everything you need to know about original sin by just spending enough time in the average church choir.

But that is all the more reason for us to be kind to one another, tender-hearted to one another, to forgive one another (Eph. 4:23), to remember that we serve one who has loved our enemies as he loves us, and who became a servant to us when we were sinners by dying on a cross for us. Of course, this is not an easy thing to do. Forgiveness does not mean that we believe that people are basically good, or that we ignore bad behavior. To forgive is to recognize that people really do bad

things, and it is those really bad things that we need to forgive. But if Jesus has forgiven even me, then I can forgive my room-mate or my wife or my husband or my priest or my senior warden or that difficult old lady in my congregation who wears the ugly hats; perhaps even my systematic theology professor.

In the end, it is Jesus, the king who was born in a manger, who brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate not by wielding a sword but by carrying his own cross, who enables us to trust and not to fear. In these last days of Advent, we await his coming and the establishment of his kingdom in hope, when he will shepherd his flock so that we who are his people and God's entire creation will dwell secure, and he will be our peace.

Servants of the Servant: Second Readings about Suffering

Isaiah 53:4-12

Psalm 91:9-16

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:35-45



In this sermon, I am going to pursue

two different, but related themes from this morning's lectionary readings – first is the theme of suffering, which I think is common to all the readings. The second theme is “how do we read the Bible?,” or, more specifically, “how is it that the New Testament writers read the Old Testament, and how might that affect how we read the Bible today?”

The problem of suffering is one of life's perennial problems – perhaps the basic problem with which we are always trying to cope. It has perplexed philosophers, and is explored in all religious traditions. When we turn to the Old Testament readings, we notice that both are dealing with this common theme of suffering, but they give very different answers to the question, answers that at first seem contradictory.

One solution to the problem of suffering is what I call the moralistic solution. The moralistic solution says that there is a direct correlation between suffering and evil and human behavior, and the simplest and most straightforward example of the moralistic solution is what I call the “good things happen to good people” scenario. The Psalmist writes: “Because you have made God your refuge and the Most High your habitation, There shall no evil happen to you, neither shall any plague come near your dwelling.” (Ps. 91:9). On a straightforward reading, the passage seems to be saying that if we have faith in God, nothing bad can ever happen to us. Or, at the least, if something bad happens, we can trust that God will deliver and protect us from misfortune: As the Psalmist says, “Because he is bound to me in love, therefore I will deliver him . . . I am with him in trouble, I will rescue him and bring him to honor . . . with long life will I satisfy him.” (Ps. 91:14,15,16).

In the Isaiah reading, we find the central text of a group of what are called the “Suffering Servant” passages. In the second half of the book of Isaiah that begins with chapter 40, there are a group of passages that describe someone whom the prophet calls the “Servant.” The Servant first appears in

chapter 42: "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights." (Is. 42:1). In chapter 44, the servant is identified with Israel: "But now, O Jacob, my servant, Israel whom I have chosen." (Is. 44:1). Beginning with chapter 49, however, the servant seems to be distinct from Israel, and God speaks of bringing salvation to Israel through his servant. The servant's obedience is contrasted with Israel's disobedience. In chapter 50 and this morning's reading, chapter 53, the prophet describes how the servant's suffering brings salvation to the people of Israel. In this morning's reading, we hear the well known description of the servant: "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed . . . he was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth ." (Is. 53:4-5,7).

Again, on a straightforward reading, the two Old Testament passages seem diametrically opposed to one another. The Psalm says that if we make the Lord our refuge, no evil will happen to us. The Psalmist is clear that if we call upon God, we can expect long life. On the other hand, Isaiah not only says that the Servant suffered, but actually goes so far as to say: "It was the will of the Lord to bruise him; he has put him to grief, when he makes himself an offering for sin . . ." (Is. 53:10). Far from having long life, the servant is put to an ignominious death: "And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death . . ." (Is. 53:9).

The Isaiah passage points to a problem with the moralistic solution. Insofar as the moralistic solution encourages us to trust in God and God's providence, that is all fine and well. At the same time, the moralistic solution is problematic for the obvious reason that its central premise – that good things happen to good people – does not always hold true. The Book of

Job is the Old Testament's answer to the moralistic reading. On the principles of the moralistic solution, Job should not have suffered unless he had failed to trust God, and Job's friends, who all subscribed to the moralistic solution – and, of course, who were not themselves suffering – reminded Job of that. In a manner similar to Job, the Servant trusts God, and yet is not spared from suffering. Rather, it is precisely the suffering of the Servant that brings salvation to the nation of sinful Israel. The nations sins, but the Servant suffers.

How did New Testament writers read these passages? When we turn to the gospels, we find that both of these passages are applied to Jesus, but in different ways by different persons. The Psalm is indeed applied to Jesus, but by Satan, who tempts Jesus to throw himself down from the temple to prove that he is the Son of God, and then quotes our Psalm: "He will command his angels concerning you, On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone." To which Jesus simply replies, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." (Matt. 4:5-7, quoting Ps. 91:11-12).

Of course, it is well known that both the New Testament writers and Jesus himself understood the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah to refer to Jesus. In the parts of Mark's gospel that we have been reading in the lectionary for the past few weeks, this theme of Jesus' suffering has been a dominant theme. Three times in Mark's gospel, Jesus predicts his suffering and death, and in the paragraph just prior to the reading this morning, Jesus says: "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death . . ." (Mark 8:31-12, 9:31-32; 10:32-34). The gospel of Mark clearly tells the story of Jesus in a way that identifies Jesus with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah.

So it might seem that the New Testament writers embrace the second notion of suffering found in Isaiah, and they reject the moralistic solution of the Psalm. Jesus is identified with

the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, and the only person in the gospels to quote from this morning's Psalm is Satan, who uses it to try to tempt Jesus to sin.

I would suggest, however, that it is not quite so straightforward as that. The writers of the New Testament understand Jesus to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament, and because of this they read Old Testament texts in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As they read the Old Testament in the light of Jesus, they employ what I call the principle of christological subversion. As Jesus himself pointed out, the good news of the gospel does not fit into our already pre-conceived categories; the gospel is like new wine that must be put in new wine skins. Jesus challenges all of our already formulated notions of what should be the case. He thus both fulfills and challenges straightforward readings of Old Testament texts. This morning's readings from Hebrews and Mark's gospel illustrate this point.

Let us turn first to the epistle to the Hebrews. The author of Hebrews was writing to a church that was suffering persecution, and who were tempted to abandon their Christian faith. Throughout the epistle, the writer reminds his audience that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's Old Testament promises. He portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system. Like the lambs who were sacrificed in the Old Testament temple, Jesus is the sacrifice for our sins. When we think of Jesus as the sacrifice, we cannot help but think of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah who, "like a sheep, was led to the slaughter."

But Hebrews also portrays Jesus as the Great High Priest; Jesus is not only the lamb who was sacrificed; he rose from the dead, and he is now the Great High Priest who is in his Father's presence in heaven, where he continues to intercede with God on our behalf. Thus today's text reads: "Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession."

(Heb. 4:14). In the writer's language about Jesus' resurrection and ascension, and Jesus' intercession on our behalf before his Father in heaven, Hebrews echoes language in this morning's Psalm and other places in the Old Testament which speak of God's protection of and vindication of those who suffer, passages that affirm that God hears the prayer of those who trust in him and delivers them from sufferings. As this morning's Psalm reads: "He shall call upon me, and I will answer him; I am with him in trouble; I will rescue him and bring him to honor. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation." (Ps. 92:15-16).

In Jesus' resurrection and ascension, God did indeed rescue him from suffering, and satisfy him with long life. In Jesus' continuing intercession for us, God the Father does indeed hear Jesus' prayer. In addition, the writer to the Hebrews invites his readers to make Christ their own refuge in the same way that the writer of the Psalm invited his readers to make the Lord their refuge and habitation. Because Jesus as the incarnate Son of God become human has suffered as we suffer, he knows what we have gone through from the inside: "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Heb. 4:15-16).

So the New Testament does not simply reject the moralistic solution as it is found in this morning's Psalm, but rather transforms it in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection. The New Testament does not promise us that we will never suffer, but it does point to the solution of our suffering in Jesus Christ. Jesus has already suffered on our behalf, and he has now been delivered and vindicated, and Christians can appeal to him and trust him to be present to us in our own sufferings, and to understand our temptations. And because he

has conquered death, we do not need to fear death.

In the gospel reading this morning, we find another example of the problem of suffering; this time there is a re-interpreted reading of what it means to be the Suffering Servant. At the beginning of the passage, the apostles James and John provide an example of people who were confident in the moralistic solution – at least as it applied to themselves. In a way that shows their obliviousness to the three predictions of Jesus' own suffering and death that appear in Mark's gospel just before this passage, the two brothers are confident advocates of the "good things happen to good people" hypothesis. They approach Jesus and ask of him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in glory." (Mark 10:37). Needless to say, the other apostles are less than happy about this. The text says that they were "indignant." (v. 41). And, of course, that's another weakness of the moralistic solution. If Jesus has only one left and one right hand, only two of his followers can get the best seats. Jesus responds by appealing to his own self-identity as the Suffering Servant: "the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45). But Jesus' identity as the Suffering Servant has implications, not only for himself, but also for his followers. Jesus' followers are expected to live as disciples of one who has chosen the path of serving and suffering, not the path of recognition and honor and authority over others that were held up as signs of success in the ancient world, and still are today: "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant. And whoever would be first among you must be slave of all." (Mark 10:42-43). As Jesus was a servant, so we also are called to be servants of one another. If you think about it, the call to be servants to others is a fairly unusual response to the problem of suffering. It is not the first response that might come to our minds.

These epistle and gospel readings of Old Testament texts are directly relevant to our own contemporary situation, because, despite almost 2,000 years passage of time, nothing much has changed. The moralistic solution is the standard answer that perhaps most people still give to the problem of suffering. This is evident even in cases of radical disagreement, as for instance, in disagreements about the relationship between suffering and personal responsibility. One side preaches personal responsibility and hard work. People get what they deserve: "Work hard, put your nose to the grind stone and your shoulder to the wheel, and you'll reap the reward." The other side disagrees with this, but only part-way: "It's not true that if you work harder and invest more time that you'll inevitably reap the benefits – because the deck is stacked. Some people have more because they start with more, and the rest don't get a fair shake. However, if we give some additional help to those at the bottom, and insist that those at the top share more of what they have, then we'll have a more level playing field." At bottom, however, both sides agree. Your lot in life is directly proportional to good or bad human behavior. If you do good, you're going to prosper. If you're not prospering, it's either because you're not doing good, or because someone else is not doing good, and so you don't have a fair chance. There is perhaps a third view – sometimes called post-modernism – that seems to think that the whole thing is hopeless. Life is absurd; there is no correlation whatsoever between behavior and reward, suffering and punishment, and so you might as well just buy yourself a new iPhone. There is one primary way in which all three versions of the modern moralistic solution differs from the traditional one, and that is that they do not need God to reward and punish. Good and bad behavior are just supposed to be rewarded and punished by the universe itself. What all three sides also hold in common is that they commonly agree that suffering is always a bad thing, and is to be avoided at all costs.

The gospel's solution to the problem of suffering is radically at odds with all of the modern versions of the moralistic solution because it says that the solution to suffering lies not in a moralistic principle of one-to-one reward and punishment, but in a person. The theme song of a television show of a decade ago called Joan of Arcadia had the line "What if God were one of us, just a slob like one of us?" The gospel says that God is indeed one of us. In the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, God the Son of God became a human being, and was crucified for us: as the Suffering Servant, he bore our griefs and carried our sorrows; he was stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. As the author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote, we can approach his throne of grace with confidence because he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses.

At the same time, the gospel also provides a genuine ethical alternative to the self-obsession of the modern secular version of the moralistic solution. If there does seem to be one characteristic of the current version of the moralistic solution, it seems to be that it is self-absorbed and ungracious. If you are not convinced of that, listen to some talk radio, or spend some time reading the comments sections of internet blogs or social media. The gospel's alternative to all this lies in servanthood. As Jesus was a servant who gave his life as our ransom, so we are called to be servants of one another. Because Jesus loved us to the point of giving his life for us, because he was wounded for our transgressions, because he forgave us when we were sinners, we can exercise the same kind of grace to others that he shared with us. We do not need to push ourselves forward in order that we might become what our culture calls "winners." Like Jesus Christ the Suffering Servant, we can be content to be what our culture thinks of as losers, but what Jesus called "servants."

In a radically misunderstood and misrepresented statement, Pope Francis recently said, "The cross shows us a different way of measuring success. We need to remember that we are

followers of Jesus . . . and his life, humanly speaking, ended in failure, in the failure of the cross.” And the pope was right; by the standards of the moralistic solution – good things happen to good people – Jesus was a failure. No one would call dying by crucifixion a “good” thing. Certainly no one would call it a “success.” But the cross’s way of measuring success is not that of what the world calls success. It is the path of the Servant who gave himself for us, who bore our griefs, and carries our sorrows, and calls us to be servants to others as he was a servant to us.

Bought With a Price: A Sermon

1 Corinthians 7:1-9



Sometimes a preacher looks at the lectionary passages and finds himself tempted to preach on the Psalm. I am going to look at the 1 Corinthians passage this morning – precisely because it is such a difficult passage, and precisely because it is so misunderstood. The apostle Paul is sometimes accused of being a misogynist sexist and of being against sex in general – and some consider this first verse in

1 Corinthians 7 as a prime example because it has both – a negative statement about women and a negative statement about sex. But modern commentators tell us that this is almost certainly a misreading. The clue is what comes first in the passage: “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote.” In 1 Cor. 7-8, Paul is responding to a letter that has been written to him by the Corinthians in which they ask a number of questions. What follows is his response to these questions.

In chapter 7, verse 1, most scholars agree that Paul is almost certainly quoting from the Corinthians’ letter to him. In the original Greek, the sentence can either be a statement or a question. So the Corinthians were either offering their opinion: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman,” or asking the question “Is it good for a man not to touch a woman?” In light perhaps of Paul’s own example of celibacy, and perhaps in response to Paul’s warnings not to follow the bad examples of pagan culture, some of the Corinthians apparently thought that it might be good advice to avoid sex altogether – perhaps even for married people.

In the section from this morning’s lectionary, Paul is actually responding to questions about two different groups of people. The first group is married couples; the second group are widows and, perhaps likely, widowers.¹ In today’s passage, Paul is then dealing with two sets of questions: 1) Is it better for married Christians to avoid having sexual relations with one another in order to devote themselves to prayer instead? 2) Should widows and widowers stay single? Throughout the rest of the chapter, Paul addresses other questions having to do with marriage or sexual practices: Can Christians get divorced? What about Christians who are married to non-Christians? Wouldn’t it be better to separate from them? What about single people? Is it okay for them to marry or is it better to stay single? Finally, he addresses some other questions: What about slaves? Should they try to obtain their freedom? Is it okay to eat food that has been offered to

idols?

When we look at Paul's responses to these questions, we notice a common pattern. First, Paul does not give absolute "yes" or "no" answers to these questions. Rather, in each case, Paul examines the question from different angles and poses both reasons for and reasons against. When discussing eating meat offered to idols, Paul points out that idols do not actually exist, and so there is no harm in eating this food. He says, "food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do." (1 Cor. 8:8). On the question of whether a slave should seek his or her freedom, he states that, generally, people should remain in the condition they are in when they become Christians; on the other hand, if slaves can get their freedom, they should avail themselves of the opportunity (1 Cor. 7:17,21).

In this morning's passage, when Paul addresses the question of whether widows should re-marry, he suggests that it would be good for them to remain single and gives himself as an example, but if they cannot resist sexual temptation, it would be better to marry. As he says, "it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion." (1 Cor. 7:9).

In response to these married couples who thought that they were so high-minded that they could devote themselves to prayer and refrain from the less spiritual practices associated with marriage like having sex – Paul basically responds: "Don't try to be more spiritual than God!" God invented sex. Paul writes that because of sexual temptation each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.² If they want to refrain from sex and devote themselves to prayer for awhile, that's fine, but only for a limited period, "so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." (1 Cor. 7:5).

Paul also introduces a second principle – the principle of love for fellow Christians. We cannot make our decisions based

on how they will affect us alone. So, in discussing the question of food offered to idols, we need to take into consideration that some with sensitive consciences might be scandalized by our behavior: "And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died." (1 Cor. 8:11). In discussing marriage, Paul points out that the first concern of husbands and wives needs to be their spouses. On the one hand, Paul states something that would not at all have been controversial in either Jewish or pagan culture at the time: "The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does." But then Paul says something that would have been truly shocking in ancient culture: "Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does." (1 Cor. 7:4). Paul understands marriage to have an equality and a mutuality in which each member of the couple yields to the wishes of the other. This passage is one of the great challenges to those who read Paul as advocating some kind of absolute authority of husbands over wives, or men over women. Marriage is not about the control of one spouse over another, but of each spouse yielding to the wishes and needs of the other.

There is finally a third principle, and this is the most important one. Paul does indeed challenge the questions of the Corinthians, and he does introduce the notion of freedom and liberty. In some cases, there is no single right or wrong answer. He also points out that in making decisions, we need to take into consideration how our decisions affect others, and those decisions need to be affected by love and concern for the other's good. But Paul is not just telling people that it's okay to do your own thing as long as no one else gets hurt – which seems to be the common ethic of much of contemporary culture. Paul is not telling people that they need to be true to themselves.

Instead, Paul appeals to what we might call a Christological principle that is a key theme throughout his letter. In the

first chapter, he criticizes those Corinthians who claimed to be following Apollos or Cephas or even himself by asking "Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1 Cor. 1:13). He then reminds them that he preaches "Christ crucified," which is foolishness to Jews and Greeks, but the wisdom of God and the power of God (1 Cor. 1:23-24).

In the context surrounding 1 Cor. 7, Paul appeals over and over again to the crucified Christ. In the chapter previous to the reading we read this morning, when Paul was warning about the danger of sexual immorality, he had reminded his listeners that they were bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:20). When addressing the question of freedom for slaves later in this morning's chapter, he again reminds his listeners that "You were bought with a price," and states that "he who was free when called is a slave of Christ," so "do not become slaves of men." (1 Cor. 7:22-23). When discussing meat offered to idols, Paul warns that when we wound someone's weak conscience, we sin against Christ (1 Cor. 8:12). And when discussing questions of sexual self-control in marriage and whether widowers should remarry, he reminds them: "Each one has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another." (1 Cor. 7:7).

Paul thus introduces the crucial point that all of our ethical decisions must flow out of our relationship with Christ and must reflect the pattern of his own death for us on the cross. We are not free to make our own decisions because we are being true to ourselves. The kind of freedom we have is the kind of freedom of those who do not belong to themselves; we are slaves of Christ because we have been bought with his blood. And it is because we have been bought with the blood of Christ that we exercise our freedom by being slaves to one another.

This recognition that we belong to Christ relativizes some of the things that our culture thinks are so important. Husbands and wives love and serve each other because we are mutually slaves of Christ, and so our bodies do not belong to ourselves but to one another. Sexual fulfillment is not the end-all and

be-all that contemporary culture seems to think that it is because ultimately we do not find our identities either in sexuality or in sexual relationships with other persons, but in Christ. Whether we get married or stay single is not so important because in either case there are ways to be faithful servants of Christ. How we treat other people – both our fellow Christians and non-Christians – becomes radically transformed when we recognize that like ourselves, they are they also are those for whom Jesus Christ died. Career and income and status – perhaps the most important things in contemporary culture besides sexual fulfillment – are also not that important. What we own is not nearly so important as who owns us – we belong first and foremost to Christ who has paid for us with his blood. The cross of Christ is indeed foolishness to those who think life is about being true to yourself – but as Paul wrote, to those of us who have been bought with Christ’s blood, the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

1 Commentators note that the Greek word for “widowers” (*kheros*) is not found in the New Testament time period when *koine* Greek was being used. Paul’s word translated “unmarried” (*agamois*) is likely Paul’s word for “widowers.” Paul addresses the “never married” later.

2 Commentators point out that Paul’s reference to “having” a wife or husband is not referring to the practice of being married, but to “having” sexual relations; cf. 1 Cor. 5:1.