

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**

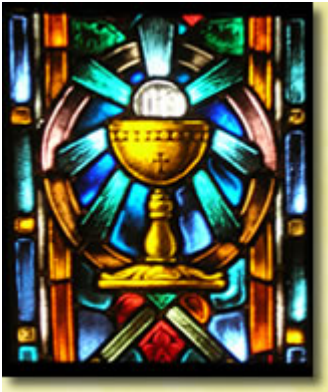
The following is perhaps the closest I've ever gotten to preaching a political sermon. It is also a good example of what to do if you misread the lectionary reading. The epistle text was actually from 1 Cor. 2, which I misread as 1 Cor. 12. Lesson? If you make a mistake, just keep on going. I had the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

Called to be Servants: An Ordination Sermon

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 119:1-8

Acts 6:1-7

Luke 12:35-40



As a theology professor, I have many favorite moments. I love the first day of class in the fall when I meet new students for the first time and we go over the syllabus for the next semester. I love those moments in class when a lecture or discussion is going particularly well and I find myself thinking “This is why I love teaching.” I love lunches in the Commons Hall when I’m sitting together with students or faculty and we’re laughing together. I love that moment at the end of graduation when all of the faculty process out of St. Stephen’s Church wearing our academic regalia and we look back at the faces of the graduating seniors and the hundreds of parents and friends who have come to celebrate. But I think that this is my absolute favorite moment – when I attend the ordination of former students whom I have seen come to the seminary as new students, watched them become part of the Trinity community and progress in their coursework and spiritual formation over a period of years, and, finally, after graduation, the church recognizes their vocation when the bishop lays his hands on them and prays for them to “Receive the Holy Spirit” for the ministry to which they have been called. I want to thank Jared and Rebecca for inviting me to preach this sermon, and Bishop Duncan for allowing me to share in this service.

I first became acquainted with Rebecca and Jared on separate occasions. I became acquainted with Rebecca because of an email she sent out on “Campus News” asking if anyone could

help her to locate some poison berries she needed. My wife Jennie knew where some were growing so she emailed back, and I assume Rebecca got her berries. Jared and I are both alive so the berries went for a harmless purpose. As many of you know, Rebecca knits and she needed the berries to make a dye for her yarn. My first real acquaintance with Jared began during a walk for coffee after lunch that I took with Professor Leander Harding, who invited Jared along. During that walk, we asked Jared about why he had come to seminary, and we found out during that talk that Jared saw his vocation as a shared vocation with his wife Rebecca. Some students come to seminary, and their spouses come along as well. Jared made clear that Rebecca and he had come together, and that they shared a common vision of ministry as something to do together. I got to know Jared and Rebecca over the next several years as they were students in my classes, and both were exceptionally good students. For the first couple of years they were here, both worshiped at Grace Edgeworth where Jennie and I attend, and I found out that they were not only good students but very good cantors. Jared and Rebecca struggled to have children, and we all rejoiced when first Naomi and now Martha were born. Jared and Rebecca formed friendships with students whom I got to know as friends as well, and some of them are here today. I can honestly say that I do not only think of Jared and Rebecca as my students, but as special friends whom I have come to love and respect. I am greatly honored to be able to preach at their ordination to the diaconate this morning.

What to say about ordination to the diaconate? I do not have time to give an entire lecture on the theology of ordination so I am going to focus on just one issue: what is the nature of ordained ministry and how is this particularly reflected in the office of deacon?

People are very suspicious of the ordained ministry, and there are some valid reasons. The sexual abuse scandals in the Roman

Catholic Church in recent decades are a good starting point, but there are examples from other churches as well. During the 1980's, a number of television evangelists were involved in very messy and very public abuses of their ministries. Those of us who are Anglicans have lived through a church split in the last decade; churches and dioceses have left the Episcopal Church; there have been court fights over church property. Bishops and clergy have been deposed. Even in the last few weeks, the Episcopal Church has made decisions at its General Convention that have resulted in public protest from other parts of the Anglican Communion. Trinity School for Ministry trains students who are Anglicans and students who are Episcopalians, and we faculty and students find ourselves on both sides of this divide. And it is painful.

Western culture is also suspicious of authority in general. There's been a t-shirt slogan going around for quite awhile now that reads "Question Authority!" To which the only proper response is: "Says who?" Dictionary definitions of the word "authority" usually associate it with power, control, and the ability to enforce obedience. In modern democratic societies we like to distinguish between absolute authority based on arbitrary power – the authority of tyrants, and democratic authority – authority that is based on the consent of the governed. What all modern notions of authority have in common is that they are subjective. They are based on the personal power and ability to command obedience exercised by some human beings over others. Those human beings might be single individuals (in the case of dictators), or they might be charismatic leaders, or they might be democratically elected, but the basis of their authority lies in their human identity, whether that of single individuals or perhaps groups of individuals. We rightly distrust this kind of authority because we recognize that human beings are flawed; we're selfish; we overreach, and we tend to look after own own interests. As Lord Acton stated, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

So how does ordained Christian ministry differ from this common notion of authority, a power to control other people based on some particular person's subjective human identity? In order to help make my point I'm going to distinguish between authority and office. I recognize that this is an overly simple distinction. The risen Jesus states in the Great Commission of Matthew 28 "All authority in heaven and earth has been given unto me." During the ordination service this morning, Rebecca and Jared promise to obey their bishop and others who have "authority" over them. So perhaps I could distinguish between two different notions of authority. For simplicity's sake, however, I am going to distinguish between authority in the sense of a control over others based on one's subjective human identity and what I am going to call "office."

What do I mean by "office"? An office is a kind of authority in the sense that those who have office can exercise various kinds of skills or power to get things done, but an office is delegated. A person who exercises an office is not exercising power based on his or her own subjective identity; rather, an office-holder has a particular task to perform and exercises skill or power only in performing that task. In addition, an office-holder receives that task from someone else, and is answerable to that someone else. As a teacher, I can exercise a certain kind of power in my classroom. I give lectures, I can require class assignments, I can give students grades, and I can even fail a student if they do not do the work I assign. However, I don't do this based on my own authority as an individual. I have been delegated this responsibility by the seminary, and I have done things like get a Ph.D. to make sure I am qualified. As a teacher, I have to base my judgment on standards of learning that I did not invent. When I grade students, my grading is supposed to be based on their performance, not on whether I happen to like them. What I can request of my students inside the classroom has no bearing on what might happen outside the classroom. So when they were

students I could not have requested that Jared and Rebecca mow my lawn to get extra credit in class.

This notion of ordination as delegated office is helpful not only in helping to understand what makes ordination distinctive, but also in helping to distinguish church orders from the common notion of authority, and even to challenge it. So first, ordination is delegated, and delegated in a very specific sense that makes it very different from other kinds of jobs. Specifically, we see the delegated nature of ordination in the concept of vocation. In the ordination service, the bishop asks the ordinand: "Do you believe that you are truly called, according to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in accordance with the Canons of this Church, to the ministry of the same?" This notion that there are particular individuals that God has called to specific ministries is so central to the biblical narratives that biblical scholars have a name for it: the "call narrative." God appears to Abraham and calls him to leave his home and his family and to go to a new land. (Gen. 12:1). God appears to Moses in the burning bush and calls him to rescue the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 3). Beginning with Samuel, the ministry of the prophets of the Old Testaments always begins with a call. In the reading from Jeremiah this morning, we hear one such call narrative. God appears to Jeremiah and tells him to deliver his message: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations. . . ." (Jer. 1:4-10).

This same pattern of the call narrative continues in the New Testament. The baptism of Jesus follows the traditional pattern with one major exception. Jesus is not called simply as a prophet but as God's beloved Son. All four of the gospels begin Jesus' ministry with the calling of his disciples, and in John's version of the last supper narrative, Jesus says to his apostles: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and

appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide . . .” (John 15:16). The pattern continues in the book of Acts, beginning with the calling of Matthias to replace Judas, but also in this morning’s passage describing the beginnings of the office of deacon. The disciples choose seven men who are “full of the Holy Spirit” and lay hands on them. The office of deacon is a delegated office in two senses. First, the deacons are recognized and chosen by the church – they do not choose themselves – but the context makes clear that they have received their delegation not just from the church, but from God, just as all the traditional call narratives point to a calling from God.

This understanding that ordained ministry is a vocation, a calling from God, challenges the contemporary understanding of authority in at least three senses. First, if vocation is a calling from God it is not based on our own self-importance or charismatic capabilities. As Jesus told his apostles, we do not choose this office; Jesus chooses us. Second, because ordained ministry is a divine calling, ordained clergy are answerable to God for their charges. Jesus says in Matthew 18:6, “but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” In the pastoral letters, the apostle Paul gives instructions to his own delegates Timothy and Titus about just how important their responsibilities are to their congregations. Finally, because ordination is a vocation from God, ordained clergy always need to be aware that they are responsible not to deliver their own opinions to their congregation, but God’s own word. Quoting again the passage from Jeremiah, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” (Jer. 1:10).

Jared and Rebecca each affirm this morning: “I do believe the

Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God and to contain all things necessary to salvation; and therefore I hold myself bound to conform my life and ministry thereto, and do solemnly engage to conform to the Doctrine, Discipline and Worship of Christ as this Church has received them." It is because vocation means that clergy have to deliver a divine word and not their own subjective opinions that the church requires this confession.

Rebecca and Jared understand well the importance of vocation to ministry. I am going to relate an event that most of you probably do not know about. Before Naomi was born, Jared and Rebecca invited some special friends to their home to help them assess whether they indeed had a joint vocation to ordained ministry. I was invited along with my wife Jennie. Our friend and faculty member Martha Giltinan was there. Rebecca's parents and her youngest sister were there along with two fellow students, Noel and Greg Pfeiffer-Collins. We talked, we prayed, and Martha in particular laid hands on Rebecca and prayed for her unborn child, whose name we did not yet know would be Naomi. I am sure that night meant a lot to Rebecca and Jared, but it also meant a lot to me that they placed such trust in us. I truly wish that our dear friend Martha could be here to see the fruition of that evening, but her namesake is here, in Jared and Rebecca's youngest daughter, named after Martha.

So that is the first way in which ordained ministry is different from the way in which our society understands authority: vocation.

The second way in which ordained ministry differs from our current culture's understanding of authority has to do with mission. The notion of "mission" has been picked up from the church by the culture, and secular businesses now have "mission statements." But what is the real mission statement of a company like Apple Computer? Something like "to sell more tablets and cell phones than our competitors so that we can

bring in more profits to our stock holders.” The church has a very different understanding of mission, and because ordained clergy act on behalf of the church, they share the same mission, which has been so helpfully stated in the words of the “Blues Brothers”: “We’re on a mission from God!”

This notion that the church is on a “mission from God” has become so popular these days that theologians have coined a Latin name for it: *missio dei*, which sounds much more intellectual than quoting the Blues Brothers. The mission of God begins with the persons of the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – who created the world and human beings in the image of God in order to share with us the love of the divine life. Humans have lost their way, however, and rather than living in harmony with one another and with our Creator, we have turned each one to doing his or her own thing, and that is what the Bible means by sin. It is interesting how this understanding of sin as individual human beings pursuing their own interests rather than living in harmony sounds a whole lot like the individualism that modern secular culture both idolizes and fears. Because we value our own autonomy, we tend to fear the same kind of autonomy that we value for ourselves when we find it in our leaders: “Question authority!” because when people get in charge they use their freedom and autonomy to expand their own territory at the expense my own freedom and autonomy. If it is not obvious, there is a huge contradiction at the heart of contemporary culture. Modern people may not believe there is such a thing as original sin, but they butt their heads against it day in and day out.

In response to the mess we have made of the world, God has set out to “set things right” (in the language that N.T. Wright uses so often) first, by creating a new people – the nation of Israel – and then by becoming incarnate as a human being himself in the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, he delivers human beings from our sin and

selfishness, and inaugurates God's kingdom. After his resurrection, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to the church. The Holy Spirit indwells this community of the church which is the expansion of God's people Israel to include the Gentiles – and the Holy Spirit indwelling the church becomes the place where the triune God shares the divine life with God's people in Word and Sacrament. The church has its own vocation: it is the community that is called to live out the harmony that God intended for creation as we look forward in hope to the kingdom that will fully be established when Jesus returns. Because Jared and Rebecca have spent several years studying in seminary, they know all this, but you can get the short version when we recite the Creed this morning.

What does ordination have to do with this “mission from God”? Throughout the Bible it is clear that God has chosen certain select individuals (I have already spoken of the notion of “vocation”) to speak God's word to his people, to lead his people in worship, and to minister to the spiritual needs of God's people. In the Old Testament, there were priests and prophets. In the New Testament, we are told that Jesus Christ fulfills perfectly the Old Testament offices of prophet, priest, and king, but Jesus also chose apostles who followed him during his earthly mission and whom he sent out to continue his mission after his resurrection. Finally, the New Testament speaks of various charismatic gifts and offices that are exercised in the church, and especially of the offices of bishops, priests or presbyters, and deacons. Those who hold church office are not about performing any other mission than the *missio dei* that is the task that God accomplishes through the entire church, but they have a specific delegated office within the church that others do not have. Rebecca and Jared, the ordination service speaks of this divine office to which you have been called: “Almighty God, who by your divine providence has appointed diverse Orders of Ministers in your Church, and who inspired your Apostles to choose into the Order of Deacons the first martyr Stephen, with others;

mercifully behold these your servants now called to the same Office and Administration.” The historic Reformation understanding of church office refers to a ministry of Word and Sacrament, and traditional discussions of ministry also discuss the pastoral ministry you have to your flock. The ordination service mentions all three. You are called “to assist the Priest in public worship. . . to baptize and to preach.” You are also called “to work with the laity in searching for the sick, the poor, and the helpless, that they may be relieved.” Word, sacrament, and pastoral ministry: that is the essence of church office. That is the heart of what you are called to do. Ordained clergy may have many other talents and gifts, and you may find yourselves doing all kinds of other things – perhaps you’ll have a knitting ministry or a software support ministry – but remember that this is your main task. Everything else, as the expression goes, is “gravy.” Do not neglect the task of word, sacrament, and pastoral care. Do not allow yourselves to be distracted from this task by other good things you might be asked or tempted to do, but that are not your main task.

Finally, there is a third aspect to ordained ministry that is in stark contrast to the way that contemporary culture understands authority and the way that the church understands “office,” and it is particularly illustrated by the office of deacon. The English word “deacon” is simply a transliteration of the Greek word *diakonos*, which means “servant.” In the passage we read from Acts this morning, we are told that the original seven deacons had the specific ministry of “serving tables.” In other words, they were doing the most basic grungy kind of ministry.

In theological writings concerning ordained ministry, it is sometimes said that the ordained “represent Christ,” that they act “in the person of Christ.” This notion of the priest as an ambassador or representative of Christ is easily misunderstood, and some are suspicious of the notion because

they fear that it means that ordained ministry is about exercising an unwarranted God-like power and authority over congregations. But that really reflects a serious misunderstanding of what it means for clergy to represent Christ. Jesus himself spoke of the kind of authority that he expected his followers to exercise. In Mark 10:42, Jesus responded to his disciples' quarreling about which one was the greatest by making clear what he expected of them: "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones 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. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

At the heart of the apostle Paul's theology is his own notion of what he understands it to mean to imitate or resemble Jesus Christ. The New Testament scholar Michael Gorman refers to this as Paul's pattern of "cruciformity," and he argues that Philippians 2:3-5 is the key passage for understanding Paul's theology: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." There's that notion of servanthood again. Paul applies this notion to his own ministry when he discusses how it is that he himself as an apostle resembles and represents Jesus Christ. Paul writes: "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." Paul goes on to write, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 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. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." (2 Cor. 4:7-11). How does the ordained ministry represent the mission of Christ? As jars of clay, as those who carry in their own bodies the death of Jesus. Ordained clergy witness to Jesus' glory by pointing away from themselves to direct our attention to the crucified and risen one.

Jared and Rebecca, that is the kind of ministry that you are being called to – not a ministry that trusts in your own competence or abilities or that is looking to advance a career or get yourself recognized. Given that you are heading to a place where the winter temperatures are 70 degrees below zero. I think you get that. This is a ministry where you are called above all to serve others, to point away from yourselves and what you can accomplish to Jesus Christ and what he has accomplished for you and for your flock. You are called to love those you serve as Jesus Christ loved you and died for you, and to lead them by teaching them what it means to become servants of the crucified Christ as well. I am confident that you are called to this ministry, and I trust that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will provide you with the courage, humility and grace to fulfill it. What an honor it has been to share with you these words.

[A Wedding Sermon](#)

Song of Songs 2:10-13 and 8:6-7

Psalm 127

Revelation 21:1-7

Mark 10:6-9

For Paul Hunter and Christina Vance



I am honored to preach this morning for the wedding of two of my former students, both of whom I am exceptionally fond. Although faculty do not have favorite students, if they did, Christina and Paul would have been two of my favorite students when they were at Trinity School for ministry, where I teach.

I want to make just a few comments about the lectionary readings, beginning with the gospel. The gospel reading points back to the creation narratives of the first two chapters of Genesis, the first book in the Bible. The context is that Jesus is being asked about whether divorce is ever permissible, and he responds by quoting the 2nd chapter of Genesis: "From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife. So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no one separate." (Matt. 19:4-6; Gen. 2:24) The Bible begins with marriage. In Genesis 1 we are told that God said, "Let us make the human being in our image, after our likeness. . . . So God created the human being in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Gen. 1:26-27) The first chapter of the Bible tells us that to be a human being is to be created in the image of God, and to be created in the image of God is to be male or female. It is only as male and female together that we as humans reflect what it means to be created in God's image.

In Genesis 2, we are told that God created woman because the first human being was alone, and needed a partner. "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the human being should be alone.'" (Gen. 2:18) In Hebrew, the word for "human being" is *ha'adam*, which is the same word as the name "Adam." The English language has historically not made a distinction between human being and male human being. English often uses the word "man" for both. But Hebrew does use different words for generic "human being" and "male human being." The Hebrew word "ha'adam" does not mean male human being, but simply "human being." It is only when God brings the woman to the human being – to Adam – that we first find the use of the word for "man" or "male human being" in the Hebrew text: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she called be called woman, because she was taken out of man." (Gen. 2:24) It is only when the female human being – the woman – comes into the picture that the original human being is recognized as a male human being – a man.

The point is this, both Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 make it clear that men and women are made for each other, and what it means to be a human being is defined by our relationship to other human beings. Those of us who are men – male human beings – are human beings only as we are in relation to women – female human beings. Women – female human beings – are human beings only as you are in relation to us – male human beings. God intended us to be with one another, and marriage makes this clear. It is marriage that is the foundation of all other human relationships. As human beings, we are not meant to be alone; we are not human beings alone, but only with one another. So the first thing that marriage teaches us is that human beings need one another. We are made to be together.

The second passage I want to look at is the reading from the Song of Songs. The Song of Songs is basically love poetry. In the reading, the lovers address one another in the direct personal language that lovers use. They speak to each other as

“I” and “you”: “My beloved speaks and says to me, ‘Arise my love, my beautiful one and come away . . . Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death.’ ” (Song of Songs 2:10; 8:6) In his book, *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis says that the unique characteristic of erotic love is that it is a love in which the lovers look to one another. Lovers are face to face. They look into each other’s eyes. Lovers do not want some thing. What they want is some one. And so the language of marriage is the language of I and of You. Marriage is inherently personal in that it is the archetype of a relationship that looks to that other person as another person, and who always addresses that person as “You.” Those who study such things tell us that the greatest cause of the failure of marriage is lack of communication. When husbands and wives stop speaking to each other as I and You, and begin distancing themselves, and they find the other person becoming “he” or “she” rather than “You,” marriages fail.

So the second thing that marriage teaches us is what it means to be persons. For you to be a person is to be someone whom I care for and address as “You.” For me to be a person is to be someone whom you as an “I” care for and address as “You.” Marriage teaches us to treat each other as persons, and not as objects as things – not someone or something we talk about, but someone we speak to, and who, in turns, addresses us. There is a helpful illustration of what this difference means. When we are talking about someone in their absence, and suddenly that person enters the room, the conversation changes. We can no longer talk about someone as “he” or “she” when that person is present. He or she now becomes “you.”

My next point depends on the passage from Revelation. As the first chapter of the Bible begins with marriage, so the last chapter of the Bible ends with marriage. The Revelation passage states, “And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride

adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.' (Rev. 21:2-3) The very next chapter, the last chapter in the Bible, continues with this bridal imagery: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty, come.' And let the one who desires take the water of life without price." (Rev. 22:17) One of the really interesting things about the Bible that makes it very different from pagan religions is that the Bible makes marriage a symbol or type of God's love for his people, and of our love for God. Pagan religions don't do that. In the Old Testament, the imagery is that of God's love for the people of Israel, and in the New Testament, the imagery is that the church is the bride of Christ. In the book of Ephesians, Paul takes the Genesis imagery and applies it to the church: "Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Paul quotes the Genesis passage about a man leaving his father and mother to become one flesh with his wife, and says: "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." (Eph. 5:25-33)

So the third thing that marriage teaches us is that marriage has something to say about the relationship between God and the church. God loves human beings, and in particular, he loves the church in the way that husbands love their wives, or at least the way that they are supposed to love their wives. Jesus showed his love for us by dying for us. And in the same way, we as human beings are made to love God in something like the way that a human couple loves one another. This means that God addresses us as "You," and in turn, we are asked to respond by addressing God as "You." So this third point is that this "I-you" relationship that lovers have with each other is also supposed to be our relationship with God. Indeed, it is founded on our relationship with God. It is because God addresses us as "You" that we can address others

as "You."

The Christian God is not a "what" but a "who." In fact, if we take the Christian doctrine of the Trinity seriously, the Christian God is not a single "who," but three "who's," three persons. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that from all eternity, God is love. In the Western understanding, the love between the Father and the Son is expressed as the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of creation teaches that the three-personal God made a universe to share this love with others: "Let us make the human being in our image." (Gen. 1:26) And the doctrine of the church says that the church is the bride whom Jesus Christ loves so much that he gave his life on a cross to redeem her. It should not be surprising then that so many mystics have used the language of marriage to describe the relationship between God and us. The Song of Songs says that "love is as strong as death." (Song of Songs 8:6) What the gospel teaches us is that God's love for us is stronger than death, stronger even than Jesus' own death on a cross.

An interesting consequence of this understanding of the correspondence between human marriage and Christ's relationship to the church as his bride is the way that Reformation churches have come to understand the function of marriage as a form of spiritual formation. In the Middle Ages, monasticism, a life of celibacy, was understood to be the highest form of spirituality. After the Reformation, spiritual writers like the Anglican priest George Herbert began to talk of marriage as a way to teach us to love God. The Christian family came to be understood as a kind of domestic monasticism. Marriage became the context in which a husband and a wife and their children became formed in their love for God.

That leads us to the Psalm. Psalm 127 focuses on children, who are the normal outcome of marriage: "Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord." (Psalm 127:3) Children are indeed a blessing, and the church, above all places should be a place

where children are welcome. Perhaps the most important thing that children teach in marriage is that the I-You relationship of marriage is not enough. Marriage is a relationship that needs to reach beyond the relationship between the man and the woman. When a child comes into a family, a husband and wife no longer look just to each other, as in the reading of the Song of Songs, but to another, to this new person. Looking again to C.S. Lewis's book, *The Four Loves*, Lewis distinguishes between Eros, a love in which the lovers look to each other, and Friendship – a love in which people share a common vision, not just looking to each other, but looking together to a common interest. Eros is a love in which two persons love one another. Friendship is a love in which two persons share a common love for someone or something else. Not all marriages are blessed with children, but I would suggest that in all marriages, the couple need to reach that point where they look beyond themselves to share a common vision – to share the love they have for each other with others as well. The couple in a marriage need to have a common care; if their marriage is to prosper, they need to love something and someone else as well. In the case of Paul and Christina, that something else already exists. Their marriage is grounded in a common love for God and his church and a common mission to the church as God's people.

So to summarize, marriage has something to teach all of us, not only those of us who are married, about what it means to be human, about what it means to love one another, about what it means to love the triune God and be loved by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and about what it means for us to share God's love with others. Marriage teaches us that we need each other – that we are not meant to be alone. Marriage teaches us that we need to recognize and treat one another as persons, not as objects, as others that we address in love as "You," and who, in turn, address us as "You." Marriage teaches us that all our relations as persons are grounded in God's own love, the love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the three-personal

God who created us, of the Son of God who became a human being as one of us, who died on a cross, and who conquered death for us that the church might be his bride. Finally, marriage teaches us that this love that God has shared with us in Christ is a love that is productive, a love that reaches out and shares the love that God has shared with us with others as well.

I conclude by giving my good wishes to Paul and Christina – that you may grow in love for one another, that you may learn to love and to trust God throughout your marriage in good times and in bad, that your marriage will bless others. To the rest of us, both married and single, that we might learn from Paul's and Christina's example. May we learn to love one another as Christ has loved us; may we love Christ as he has loved us; may we share that love with others who may not know that God is love, may we allow God's love for us to bless others. Amen.

If God is for Us: A Sermon

Psalm 78

Nehemiah 9:16-20

Romans 8:35-39

Matthew 14:13-21



I begin my sermon this morning with a question: What's going on in the lectionary? During the Season

after Pentecost, what is sometimes called "ordinary time," the lectionary practice is to read through one of the synoptic gospels chapter by chapter and an accompanying epistle the same way. Because the New Testament readings are sequential like this, there is not usually any evident connection between the gospel reading and the epistle reading. What Matthew is saying in his gospel may or may not have anything to do with what Paul is saying in the epistle to the Romans.

Whether it was intended by the lectionary compilers or not, I think that there is a parallel between the epistle and the gospel readings this morning. Let's begin with the epistle. Romans 8:31-39 is the climax of everything Paul has been writing up to this point in the letter. The main theme in the lectionary reading is God's love, and is a repetition of what Paul had already said in Romans 5:1-11. In Romans 5, Paul wrote, "[W]e rejoice in our sufferings . . . because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. . . . God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (5:2,5,8) In this morning's reading, Paul says, "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." What Paul writes here is a continuation of what we read in last week's lectionary reading: "What then shall we say to these things? 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?" (8:31-32)

If God is for us, who can be against us? Paul lists a number of things that might suggest that God is not for us. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger or sword?" (8:35) People often list just the kinds of things that Paul mentions here as proof that there is no God,

or if there is a God, he is not for us, but against us. If I am suffering tribulation or distress, perhaps that means that God has abandoned me. If I cannot provide food for my family, perhaps that means that God does not care for me. If the world is full of violence and war, perhaps that means that there is no God, or God would prevent such things. If Christians suffer persecution, perhaps that means that there is no God because if there were a God, certainly he would protect those who claim to believe in him.

Paul has one response to all of this. We know that God is for us because of an event, something that has happened – the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We know that God is for us because he has given us his Son. In giving us his Son, God has revealed his nature. God has show us in Jesus what he is like. God is love.

A major theme in the letter to the Romans is God's justifying righteousness. Theologians have written shelves of volumes on Paul's doctrine of justification, and justification language is court room language – the language of judgment. Many people interpret these courtroom metaphors to mean that God is primarily a judge. No one wants to be judged, and that is why many people, like the New Atheists, reject the God of the Bible. A God who is a judge is a God who hates sinners. We're all sinners, and why would you want to have anything to do with a God who hates you?

But if we're going to reject the God of the Bible, then we need to carefully read the Bible first. Paul's argument is not that because God is a judge, therefor God hates sinners. Paul's argument is that God loves sinners, and because God loves sinners, he has dealt with the problem of our sin, not by condemning us, but by taking our judgment on himself in Jesus. That's what justification means. We don't have to be judged because Jesus was judged instead. God is not the prosecuting attorney who wants to find us guilty. God is our advocate who has found us not guilty. If you're arrested, when

you receive your Miranda Rights, you're told, "If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you." The whole point of Paul's doctrine of justification in the letter to the Romans is that Jesus is the attorney who has been provided for us. Paul asks "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." (8:33-34). Paul rightly asks, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

What does this have to do with Matthew's gospel? The lectionary reading in Matthew's gospel is the story of the feeding of the multitudes with a few fish and a handful of loaves of bread. It is the only miracle story told in all four gospels. The gospel writers obviously thought that it was an important event.

What do we make of the miracles in the Bible? A lot of modern biblical scholars and even ordained clergy are uncomfortable with them. I once heard an Easter sermon preached in an Episcopal Church in which the priest said that the good news of Easter was that modern biblical scholars have shown us that we don't have to believe that Jesus rose bodily from the dead. I'm not sure why this priest thought it was such good news to believe that Jesus was a ghost.

But miracles play a central role in many of the biblical narratives. To reject them outright makes the whole thing incoherent. And there is one key miracle at the heart of Christianity – the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is not a ghost. He is alive. As Paul writes, "Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who is interceding for us." (8:34) It is because Jesus is alive that he can intercede for us. Other biblical miracles make sense in light of the resurrection.

What are the characteristics of miracles in the Bible? First,

miracles are wonders. They grab our attention by pointing out to us that something unusual is going on. Think of the story of Moses and the burning bush. According to Exodus, when Moses saw the bush, he said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight." (Exodus 3:3) The New Testament tells us that people regularly responded to Jesus' miracles with wonder and amazement (Mark 1:27, Matt. 8:27).

Second, miracles are signs, which is the gospel of John's favorite word to describe them. They show that the Creator is present. In C.S. Lewis's book, *Miracles*, he points out that the miracles of the Bible are not magic. They're not like the Fairy Godmother in *Cinderella* who turns a pumpkin into a coach or mice into coach drivers. Rather, they are examples of the kinds of things that God does always in creation. So, in John's gospel, when Jesus turns water into wine, this is nothing different than what God does all the time. Every year, God turns water into wine through the process of vines that take sunlight and water and soil and transform them into grapes, grapes which ferment and become wine. At the wedding in Cana, Jesus just made it happen faster. In the feeding of the multitudes, Jesus took a few loaves and a handful of fish, and multiplied them. But every year, God creates much wheat from individual seeds that are planted, multiplied, harvested and made into bread. Every year, a few fish multiply to many fish. When Jesus fed the crowds, he again did what God does all the time. He just sped up the process.

Miracles are also signs of salvation and healing. They show that God is for us. They show that evil will not triumph. The ordinary course of the world, which so often threatens humanity, is reversed. Through Jesus' miracles, the blind see. The deaf hear. The dead are raised to life. These miracles are signs of the new creation in which there will be no more sickness, everyone will see, everyone will hear, and no one will die.

And, of course, the point of all of this is that there is one

great miracle, and that is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. There was a television show a few years ago called Joan of Arcadia and the theme song had the lyrics, "What if God were one of us, just a slob like one of us?" In Jesus, the Son of God himself has become a human being, and lived as one of us. The incarnation means that God has come among us in person in Jesus, and the miracles draw our attention to who he is. When John the Baptist was in prison, he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one to come, or should we wait for another?" Jesus responded, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." (Matt. 11:3)

What is going on in the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves? First, this miracle points back to the time when God fed Israel with manna in the wilderness. In our reading from Nehemiah this morning, we find that the manna was a sign both of God's patience with sinners, and also evidence of God's love: "You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst. . ." Even when Israel did not obey God, Nehemiah says, God did not forsake his people: "[Y]ou are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. . . . You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing." (Nehemiah 9:15-21) Throughout the forty years, the manna that appeared every day was a sign from God that God had not given up on Israel. He will not give up on us.

The feeding of the multitudes also reminds us of Jesus' meals with sinners. We all know the story about Jesus eating a meal with the tax collector Zacchaeus. Tax collectors were considered the lowest of the low in Jewish culture because

they were collaborators with the occupying Romans. They were traitors to their own people. In ancient Middle Eastern culture, the hospitality of sharing a meal with someone was considered to be a sign of acceptance. If you were a Jew, you would not eat a meal with a tax collector any more than Republican House Speaker John Boehner would call Democratic President Barack Obama on the phone and ask "How about going out and seeing a movie tonight?" By eating with sinners like Zacchaeus, Jesus showed God's love for them. As he said to his opponents, "I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:32)

The feeding of the multitudes is also a sign pointing forward to the eschatological meal when all will eat at God's table. God is in the process of setting all things right, and this miracle is a reminder of that. As Jesus' miracles of healing point to a time when there will be no illness, the miracle of the loaves points to the time when there will be no hunger.

Finally, the multiplication of the loaves points forward to the eucharist, the church's meal in which Jesus shares his risen life with us when we drink wine and eat bread. This is a central theme in John's gospel. In John 6, after the miracle of the loaves, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. . . Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." In the wine and bread of the eucharist, Jesus meets us as our host, and we are welcomed as his guests.

How does the miracle of the loaves and fishes fit in with what we have read this morning in Romans 8? The key connection between both passages is their focus on Jesus as the revelation of God's love for and acceptance of sinful human beings. Jesus is both the sign and guarantee that God is for us, that he loves us, that he will not abandon us or forget us.

That God is for us does not mean that we will experience no difficulty, no suffering, no illness or sorrow. We will still experience these things, and, in the end, we are all going to die. It is precisely because we experience and are threatened by these things that we need to hear the promise of God's love because it is these things that lead us to worry about whether or not God really does love us. Paul mentions three specific kinds of threats in Romans, and my own hunch is that they are exhaustive.

The first threat is judgment. Consciousness of our sinfulness, or even of our own inadequacies and failures can convince us that God does not love us. Sometimes we cannot even live up to our own standards of perfection, let alone God's. Paul's response is to say that Jesus died to save sinners. God does not condemn us. He justifies us. Jesus does not condemn us. He intercedes for us.

The second threat is human injustice to other human beings. The news has been full of reminders in recent weeks that human beings can do horrible things to other human beings. In Iraq, Christians have been driven out of the city of Mosul, and have been threatened with death. In northern Nigeria, Boko Haram kidnapped hundreds of teenage girls a few months ago, and they continue to commit acts of terrorism that kill innocent people every day. In Israel, a war is waging in Gaza. There are times when such evil done by human beings to other human beings is overwhelming. Paul's response is not to say that such evils do not matter or that they are not evil, but to assure us that "In all these these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (8:37)

Finally, there is natural evil: sickness, accident, death. From time to time we all receive reminders of our mortality. Dear friends become ill and are diagnosed with terminal diseases, family members die. We pray and beg God for healing, and sometimes miracles do indeed happen. But sometimes it seems that our prayers are not heard, and those we most care

for die. But Paul reminds us that not even death can separate us from God's love. "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." (8:38)

What should be our response to this message of God's love for us, a message we hear from both Paul and in the gospel story of the miracles of the loaves? I am going to suggest three possible responses. What makes these responses interesting is that they are directly contrary to the characteristic responses of much of our contemporary culture.

The first response is gratitude. If Paul and Matthew are right, then everything we have is a gift. Gratitude is the recognition that life is a gift, and God's salvation in Christ is a gift. Nothing can separate us from God's love, but ingratitude can lead us to forget that God loves us. Irony is the characteristic attitude in today's culture that refuses to see life as a gift. If gratitude is the recognition that all that we have is a gift, irony is the attitude that pretends to see through everything, that can find a gray cloud in every silver lining, that asks about every gesture of God's providence, "What's the catch?" God's love rescues us from irony. In the end, God's love overcomes hardship, and because that is true we can be grateful to God even in times of hardship.

The second response is trust. We do indeed live in what is sometimes a horrible world. People do evil things to other people. We may even find that we have been treated unjustly even by those of whom we expect more, by fellow Christians, or by those we love most. There is perhaps nothing more difficult to forgive than betrayal by a friend or a spouse. Suspicion is the characteristic attitude of contemporary culture that is the opposite of trust. Trust is not the denial that bad things happen, but the recognition that we can respond to each bad

thing with mindfulness rather than suspicion because we know that God can be trusted, even when others fail us.

Finally, there is hope. The temptation when bad things happen is to give up, to throw up our hands, and ask what is the point? Cynicism and despair are the ways in which contemporary culture often sends the message that there is no point. In the end, our culture says, our only real option is to shrug our shoulders and perhaps respond with witty sarcasm, because after all, as they say, "What are you gonna do?" But hope is the recognition that there is no need for cynicism because God has done something. In the grand miracle of the incarnation, God has become one of us in Jesus, he has taken on himself in the cross of Christ all of the sin, judgment, pointlessness and evil that the world can throw at him, and in his resurrection, Jesus Christ has laughed at death. Death was the wildest curve ball that the world could pitch at the incarnate Son of God. Jesus took a swing at death, and he knocked it out of the ball park. To use a euphemism, Jesus took on death, and he kicked its behind. We can be full of hope because in Christ, God has defeated even death, and he is on our side. As Paul asks, "If God is for us, who can be against us? . . . In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."