

When Good People Make Bad Things Happen: A Sermon

Exodus 19:3-8

Psalm 15

1 Peter 4:7-11

Matthew 16:24-27



The lectionary readings this morning are Ember Day readings. Historically, in the Western church, Ember Days are a set of days set apart for praying and fasting and for the ordination of clergy. These readings all have an ethical focus, and they strike me as particularly appropriate given events that are happening in our culture right now.

Our country is in the midst of what can only be called an ethical crisis, the center of which seems to lie in an inability to discern whether there is such a thing as a common cultural good. Here are a few examples.

You can attend a conference in Washington D.C. next week called the “Values Voter Summit,” where you can hear speakers like Dr. Ben Carson, Kellyanne Conway, Vice President Mike Pence, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo talk about moral values. Meanwhile, the subject of the news the last several months has been how much their boss, the President of the United States, did or did not know about a hush money payment made to a porn star, and how one after the other of the president’s associates keep pleading guilty to various felonies. So much for voting your values.

The other big news in the secular culture over the last year or so has been the "me too" movement, in which various famous men mostly connected with the entertainment industry have been accused of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct. It turns out that household names that people once admired have a dark past. You know the names so I don't need to mention them. The list keeps growing longer, and *Time Magazine* has a regularly updated online list of 141 names so far.

If these kinds of things were only happening in the secular culture, outside the church, perhaps Christians could afford to be glib. After all, what do you expect of *those* people? What should give Christians reason to pause are recent revelations of moral misconduct by Christians in places of leadership. Last month, a Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report accused 300 Catholic priests of sexually abusing over 1,000 children, and of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church engaging in a massive cover-up of this abuse.

You might think that this does not concern those of us who are not Roman Catholic, but that would just mean that you have not been paying attention. While perhaps not as widespread, sexual abuse is not confined to Catholic clergy. I could tell you what I know about cases of sexual abuse by Anglican and Episcopal clergy,

And there are other areas of moral crisis within the church, particularly the ongoing crisis about sexuality that has led to a kind of slow motion dissolution of the Anglican communion over the last decade and a half. At its General Convention this summer, the Episcopal Church laid down an ultimatum that will make it even more difficult for orthodox clergy to stay within that church. If the clergy go along, they will be forced to compromise their consciences and to allow in their churches what they understand to be a violation of faithfulness to the Scriptures as God's Word, and to their ordination vows. If they refuse to go along, they may find themselves subject to deposition and to losing their

congregations. Those who have left or are considering leaving will face law suits over property and the pain that comes with division as some go and others stay.

What, if anything, do these incidents have in common? I would suggest three factors.

First, in each one of these cases, the people involved are good people. The Values Voters, the Hollywood entertainment industry, the Roman Catholic hierarchy, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church – these people are not bad people, but good people. In their own way, each one of these groups is attempting to make the world a better place.

Second, there is self deception. In each case, an otherwise good group has allowed something like a concern for a moral cause to blind themselves or to overlook some moral failing that has really hurt weak or innocent people. Each group has convinced itself to overlook the moral failing because they wanted to preserve a good moral cause that they either wanted to promote or that they feared was under threat.

Third, there is consequent manipulation and cover-up. When it became obvious that there was an elephant in the room, that the moral failing or moral conflict was not going to go away, each group stooped to use manipulative means to cover up the moral offense or to further their cause by coercion or manipulation when it was no longer possible to promote what they thought was a good agenda through the ordinary means of persuasion. Self-deception means that we manipulate others, but we convince ourselves that we are pursuing the good in doing so.

In what follows, I am not going to pretend to have any answers or solutions to this moral crisis in the culture right now. However, it does seem to me that if the culture (including the church) is in the midst of an ethical crisis, that looking at what the Scriptures say about Christian ethics might be of

some help. So let's look at this morning's lectionary readings.

First to be noticed is that the ethics of the Bible is not a kind of ethics in general, an ethics for everybody, but a distinctively Christian ethics with unique characteristics because it is Christian. This contrasts at least with the understanding of ethics held by both the conservative "Value Voters" and by the liberal ethics of Hollywood. For both the "Values Voters" and Hollywood, there is a notion that the right thing to do is the right thing for everybody to do, and the right thing to do is just what their own group would do. Conflicts occur because the two sides don't agree with each other about what that right thing is, and because they disagree so much, their own version of the right thing just cannot be the "right thing for everybody." The result is an irresolvable disagreement, and each side inevitably concludes that the other side is guilty of "bad faith." Those other people must be misguided, foolish, or perhaps even evil, or, as one political candidate put it, a "basket of deplorables."

How does Christian ethics differ from a general ethics for everybody? First and foremost, Christian ethics begins in grace. All Christian ethics is a response to the priority of divine grace, to the good gift of God that is both undeserved and unsought for. In the Exodus reading this morning, we hear: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." (Ex. 3:4) In Deuteronomy, we are told: "The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples." (Dt. 7:7) In Romans we read that "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8)

Christian ethics begins not with something that we have done, but with something that God has done. In the Old Testament, God created a nation by rescuing Israel from slavery. In the

New Testament, God has created the new people of the Church by sending his Son to deliver us from sin when we were powerless. But that means that at the start, Christian ethics is not an ethic for just anybody, but an ethics for those whom God has rescued and redeemed from sin. It also means that Christian ethics is not an ethic for good people, for either the good "Values Voters" or for the successful culture creators of Hollywood. The Christian ethic is not an ethic for good people because we who are Christians are not good people, but bad people who have been forgiven and delivered from our sins, and so acknowledge our foolishness and our selfishness.

Again, in contrast to universal ethics, Christian ethics is a communal ethic, not an ethic for just everybody, but an ethic for God's people, an ethic for the Church. God addresses the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai: "If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples . . . and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'" (Ex. 19:5-6) In 1 Peter, we hear, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Pet. 2:9) So Christian ethics is not for everybody in general, but for the Church, for those who recognize that they are redeemed sinners.

Christian ethics also has a particular structure or pattern. We see that structure in the gospel reading this morning: "Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.'" (Matt. 16:24-25) The pattern of Christian ethics is cruciform, a discipleship that means patterning our lives on the cross of Christ. As Paul writes in Philippians 2: "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 found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:5-8)

This cruciform pattern is not a rejection of the self, it is not about self-denial for its own sake, it is not a kind of masochism, but it is about being united with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection in order that we might serve the interests of the other in the same way that the incarnate Christ took on the form of a slave for us. As Paul writes: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Phil. 3-4)

We see the way that this cruciform Christian ethic plays itself out in other passages from this morning's readings. Christian ethics is a cruciform community ethic for the Church lived out in response to God's redemption in Jesus Christ. It has the following characteristics:

First, Christian ethics is grounded in love: We love one another as Christ has first loved us (John 13:34). As we read in 1 Peter this morning: "keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Pet. 4:7) Christian love demonstrates itself by voluntarily becoming servants to one another: Peter continues, "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." (v. 10)

Second, Christian ethics is about speaking the truth to one another, and living in such a manner that our lives are consistent with what we claim to believe, and what we say. In the Psalm we read this morning, "O Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart; who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil

to his neighbor.” (Ps. 15:1-3)

Christian ethics is then about speaking the truth and living truthfully. For Christians, truth is not merely a matter of cognitive knowledge, about knowing truth from falsity – although in our post-modern culture that is important – but most importantly about living in accordance with God’s reality. Christians do not need then to engage in deception or manipulation, either of themselves or of others. Because they live out lives consistent with the grace and forgiveness that has been given them in Jesus Christ, Christians can show that same grace to others, and they do not need to deceive or manipulate others in an attempt to make sure that their right side will win out. They can trust God to take care of their future, and so they can trust God in their dealings with others.

Of course, to live in such a way is costly and difficult, and it is only made possible through God’s grace. But God’s grace is precisely what we have been promised has been given us in Jesus Christ. We are to serve one another through the strength that God supplies. And the point of it all is to glorify the God who has himself graciously given himself to us in Jesus Christ. Again, we hear in 1 Peter that we are to live as “good stewards of God’s varied grace; whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.” (1 Pet. 4:10-11)

So that is the basic structure of Christian ethics. It is a response to God’s gift to us in Jesus Christ. It is a communal ethic for the Church, not an ethic for “just everybody.” It is a cruciform and resurrection ethic that follows the pattern of Jesus Christ’s own humiliation on the cross and resurrection from the dead; it is an ethic of servanthood that is grounded in love, it recognizes in the other someone for whom Christ has also died, it speaks truthfully and it lives truthfully, and it has no room for deception or manipulation. It is an

ethic that trusts in God's providence and so does not need to coerce or manipulate others in order to get our own way or to promote what we think is our own good cause.

Of course, this Christian ethic is far removed from the "general ethics for everybody" of both the "Values Voters" and the secular progressivism of Hollywood, New York City, and the Seattle tech community, even if Christians do care about "family values," and we don't boycott Starbucks just because we don't like the design on their Christmas coffee cups. At the same time, we should not be surprised that visions of the good life that are so far removed from the Christian gospel lead to irresolvable conflicts. We also should not be surprised that for all the moral posturing of both groups, an inherent moral vacuum results in payoffs to porn stars and the "me too" revelations that former cultural heroes have clay feet.

But we also have to address the crisis in the churches. It is not just Washington, D.C. and Hollywood where the ethical crisis lies, but among ourselves. In the last few minutes of a sermon, I don't have solutions, but I do have some brief reflections.

First, the crisis in the churches has taken place because those in leadership have forgotten or ignored one or another one of these key aspects of Christian ethics and discipleship. In the Roman Catholic Church, the hierarchy decided to protect the institution rather than to speak the truth and live the truth. At a certain level, one can understand. A shocking scandal would have undermined all of the good that the Church does, and so the scandal was covered up, and offending priests were moved from parish to parish. But the scandal happened anyway, and the cover up made plain that the hierarchy had forgotten that their entire purpose was to be servants of the laity, not to look the other way while the wolves fed on the flock.

In the current crisis about sexuality in the mainline churches – this is not just about Episcopalians and Anglicans – there is an irony in that leaders of the mainline churches have decided to use the politics of power to further a cause that presumably challenges the politics of power. But again, these leaders have forgotten that they are shepherds of the community of Christ's Church, not advocates of a cause who have to do whatever is necessary to both promote what they perceive to be the goodness of that cause and to eliminate any resistance that might offer protest.

As orthodox Christians, how should we respond to these parallel crises in the Church, one concerning sexual abuse by clergy and other leaders, one concerning political manipulation to promote an agenda that at the least is at odds with catholic unity, and with charity towards those who not only do not support the cause but who find it to conflict with the gospel?

Any response cannot forget what Christian ethics is about. As orthodox Christians, we need to remember that we are servants of one another in a community. Our life flows from our worship of the One who loved us and died for us, and we need to both speak in love, and to walk in love, to do the truth and to speak the truth. There must be a fundamental openness and honesty about what we do, and an unwillingness to manipulate or to conspire in secret to promote our own agendas.

I also note that, among non-Catholics, there has been a lot of talk about solidarity with the Catholic Church right now, and about the need for other churches to recognize our own failings in this regard. Absolutely, but in that concern for solidarity, it is important not to forget that there are real victims. Forgiveness of sin and reconciliation should not mean "no accountability" for those who have abused the trust of the innocent. Our concerns should be first with the victims of clerical abuse, and only then with the abusers.

Finally, if Christian ethics is a community ethic, then the integrity of the Christian community must be maintained. Christians need to be Christians. This is the truth of Rod Dreher's *Benedict Option*. At the same time, however, speaking the truth in love must also mean that to be the Church means always to be oriented toward mission. Circling the wagons is not a missional option.

If there is an ethical crisis in contemporary culture rooted in the collapse of any notion of a common good, then, as Christians, we need to promote that common good, not to abandon it. As Christians, we certainly should expect to have enemies, but Jesus has commanded us to love our enemies, and to bless our persecutors (Matt. 5:44). The mission of the gospel means that we respond to our enemies, not only to those outside the Church, but to those inside the Church as well, with love, with the hope to convert, and not the desire to destroy.

And that is all I have. Perhaps it is a start. God have mercy on us, and God forgive. Have mercy on a culture that has lost its way, and needs to hear the call of the Good Shepherd. But even more, God have mercy on his Church. May we learn once again what it means to be servants, to speak the truth in love, to walk in the way of the cross.

**Why Everything (Does Not)
“Stink”: A Sermon on
Suffering Delivered to New**

Seminarrians

Job 1

Acts 8: 26-40



There are certain questions that people ask generation in and generation out. They are the “greatest hits” of the generations. Who am I, and what should I do with my life? She (or he) loves me or loves me not? Did I forget to turn off the light or lock the door or did I remember to unplug the iron?

One of the oldest of these questions is “Why do bad things happen to good people?” There’s a guy on Youtube who just put out a video entitled “Why everything stinks” (except that he doesn’t say “stink”), and you would imagine listening to him that he seems to think that he’s the first person to have ever noticed that life just isn’t fair. But of course this is not a new observation. There are religions and philosophies (like Buddhism and Stoicism) whose whole starting point begins with the observation that “Life is hard.”

I am always somewhat amused at people like the guy in the Youtube video who seem to assume that Christians are naïve or polyannish about suffering, that somehow Christians do not recognize that there is any tension between believing in a good God who created a good world, and yet sometimes life stinks. Have these people never heard gospel spirituals like one of my old favorites that has the lines “Talk about suffering here below, and talk about loving Jesus, Talk about suffering here below, and let’s keep following Jesus.”

Have these people never read the Bible? (Well, of course they haven't.)

This morning's lectionary readings begin with the story of Job, and we will continue to hear Job's story for the next several weeks. The whole point of the story about Job is to ask the question "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

The first thing we notice about Job is that he is not an Israelite. There are no references in Job to God's covenant with Israel, to Moses, to the Jewish law. Job is a pious "pagan," yet Job worships the God who is the one God of traditional Hebrew faith.

Job is also the classic biblical example of undeserved suffering. Throughout the book the question Job asks is "Why is this happening to me when I haven't done anything wrong?" A related theme of the book of Job concerns character: the character of God, the character of Job, the character of Job's wife and his friends. Concerning God, the key question is whether God can be trusted. Concerning Job, the key question is whether he will continue to trust God. Notice how the chapter ends, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong." (Job 1:22)

Concerning Job's wife and his friends, the question has to do with their presumption to know not only what God is about – that God is about punishing wrong-doing – but that Job's suffering indicates something about his character. Contrary to what the narrator has already told us, Job's friends believe that he must have sinned, or he would not be suffering.

Job receives his answer at the end of the book. The answer is given in terms of God's character as Creator. Because God has created the world, God knows what he is doing, and God can be trusted. At the same time, note that God never answers Job's question as to why he is suffering. Instead Job is told that he should not presume to have insight into God's workings.

Concerning Job's friends, we are told that they are wrong – wrong concerning both God's character and Job's character. Job had not sinned, so God did not punish him. And yet, Job still suffered. Job's question is: "Why is this happening to me when I have done nothing wrong?," and the final appeal is to mystery. We do not know, but we can trust God who is the Creator. It is perhaps as far as one can go with a solution to the problem of evil that focuses only on creation and God as Creator.

There is another Job figure in the literature of the Old Testament, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. The Ethiopian eunuch in the Acts reading might well ask, "Is the writer speaking of himself or someone else?" because the historical identity of this character is not clear from the book of Isaiah itself. As does Philip in his conversation with the eunuch, Christians look to this passage as a prophecy or typology of Jesus Christ, but before we get in too much of a hurry, we should ask who the Servant of the Lord is in the original context of the second half of Isaiah. In this second section of the book, the prophet is addressing a nation that has gone through exile because of their sin. In Isaiah 41:8, the Servant is identified with the nation of Israel: "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen . . ." Yet at other times, the Servant seems to be identified with an individual distinct from Israel. In Isaiah 53, the Servant is depicted as a kind of martyr, who has suffered on behalf of Israel. The Acts passage quotes the Isaiah passage to depict the Servant as like a sacrificial or Passover lamb: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation for his life is taken away from the earth." (Acts 8:32-33; Is. 53:7-8) At the same time, not only does the Servant suffer, but a new perspective is introduced. The Servant suffers for sins, but not for his own sins. Rather, the Servant suffers because of the sins of others, and

specifically for our sins, which in the context certainly means the sins of Israel: "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Is. 53:4-6)

In comparison to the book of Job, two new factors enter into the question of why the innocent suffer in Isaiah. First, there is the special role that Israel plays in God's plan. The God who is described in Isaiah is not simply the Creator God who has created the world, but the God who has made a covenant with Israel, and Israel has a special role in God's plan. Israel is God's servant. Second a new notion is introduced into the question of innocent suffering, the notion of *vicarious* suffering. Suffering because of sin, yes, but suffering not for one's own sins, but to bear the sins of another. So if the key question in Job is "Why am I suffering when I have done nothing wrong?," the key question in Isaiah 53 is, "Why is God's Servant suffering?," and the answer is "Not for his own sins, but to somehow carry the consequences of *my* wrong doing": "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

When we turn to the New Testament, we see that the New Testament writers address the issue of innocent suffering in a way that goes beyond the book of Job, but also goes beyond the figure of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah in a way that brings the themes of both Job and Isaiah together. First, in the New Testament, Jesus is described as a Job-like figure. Jesus is the innocent person who suffers, but in Jesus' case, he truly is innocent because, unlike even the righteous figure of Job, Jesus has engaged in no wrongdoing whatsoever. The apostle

Paul writes of Jesus, "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21). The writer of Hebrews says of Jesus that he is "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Heb. 4:15) 1 John 3:5 states "You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin." Like Job, Jesus continued to trust in God even in the midst of his suffering. In 1 Peter, we hear, "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth." (1 Pet. 2:22) On the cross, Jesus cries like Job, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46) But Jesus also commits himself to God. Jesus' last words on the cross are: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46)

But the New Testament also identifies Jesus as the one whose death fulfills the role of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. In the Acts reading from the lectionary, after the Ethiopian eunuch asks to whom the Isaiah passage is referring. We read, "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus." (Acts 8:35). Not only in this passage, but in the resurrection story of the two disciples traveling on the Emmaus road after Jesus' death by crucifixion, Luke has the story of the risen Jesus opening up the meaning of the Scriptures: "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Luke 24: 25). Other New Testament passages interpret Jesus' death through this Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah. In 1 Peter, we read: "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." (1 Peter

2:21-24)

There is one final way in which the suffering of Jesus ties together these two Old Testament images of the Innocent Sufferer. As I said earlier, Job focuses on God as the Creator, while Isaiah focuses on God's special relationship to Israel. In the New Testament, it becomes clear that Jesus is not just another Israelite, but that Jesus is himself One with the God the Creator. In Colossians 1, Paul writes that Jesus 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." (Col. 1:15-16) In Philippians 2, Paul brings together the creation imagery from Job with the Suffering Servant imagery of Isaiah: "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." (Phil. 2:5-8)

So in this final step, the question of the Ethiopian eunuch becomes heightened. Is the prophet writing about himself or about another? If the key question in Job is "Why am I suffering if I have done nothing wrong?," and the key question in Isaiah is "Why is God's Servant suffering?," then the key question in the New Testament is "Who is this Servant who is suffering?" And the answer is something completely unheard of before now. The New Testament goes beyond Job's answer to say that in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, the Creator of the universe has himself become Job. In the cross of Jesus Christ, God has become one of us and has taken on all of the suffering of creation. As it goes beyond Job, the New Testament imagery goes beyond what Isaiah says about the Suffering Servant. If the Servant somehow bore the burden of

Israel's sins, because Jesus Christ is the very Creator become a human being, he is able to bear the sins and suffering of all creation, of everyone who has ever lived. In John's gospel, Jesus refers to his crucifixion, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12:32) And, finally, on top of that, Jesus' resurrection means that death and suffering do not have the last word. In Jesus Christ, God has overcome death through life. Paul contrasts the death that we all have inherited from Adam's sin, with the life that comes from Jesus Christ's death and resurrection: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." (1 Cor. 15:22) In light of Jesus' resurrection, Paul goes on to write, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 15:24-27)

So the answer to the guy on YouTube is "No, you're wrong. It is not *everything* that stinks, but suffering and death." (Again, he doesn't say "stinks.") And life has overcome death through Jesus' resurrection!

Jesus is the Job who has trusted in God and has been vindicated. Jesus is the Suffering Servant who has borne the burdens of our suffering and even of our own sin so that we do not have to suffer even the burden of our guilt for the wrongdoing in which we may have caused others to suffer. Jesus is the Creator who has become one of us and has conquered death through the life of his resurrection! At this point, the preacher is supposed to ask "Can I hear an Amen?"

I would be remiss if I did not conclude with some final practical application, especially since you are new seminarians, so here are three, the first of which will be kind of discouraging, but we are talking about suffering after all.

So first. Coming to seminary does not mean that you will not suffer. Seminary is part of life, and God does not promise you any more than he promised Job that everything will be “hunky dory,” just fine. This is my twelfth year teaching at seminary, and in that time, I have seen two students die of cancer before they finished their program, and one die a few years after graduating. One of the most beloved faculty members on the campus died of cancer over a one year period. The brother in law of a faculty member died of cancer and the brother of another was killed in a car accident. There have been students who have experienced deaths in their families, suicides of housemates and close friends, and struggles with depression and physical illness. We have many international students, and I have heard them talk of their anxiety when their families experienced tragedy and they were not able to help because they were halfway across the world. And, on top of that, there are the normal relationship struggles, difficulties in marriages, and broken hearts when people fall in love and it does not work out. I could say more, but these kinds of events are not unusual because we are a seminary. They happen everywhere and to everyone all of the time.

If I were to leave you there, I would not be telling the whole story. You have come to a place where people care about you, and you will not be alone. This is a place of prayer, and I would encourage you to get to know your fellow students, and the faculty, and to pray for each other’s needs. We know that in the cross, Jesus Christ has borne our burdens. In 1 Peter, the apostle tell us to “Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7) But we also know what this enables us to bear one another’s burdens. Paul tells us in Galatians to “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ,” (Gal. 6:2) and the apostle continues to write in 1 Peter, “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.” (1 Peter 5:10)

I would add one final point. You have come to study at a seminary, and for many, perhaps most of you, that means that you have come to pursue some sort of ministry. A major part of that ministry will mean being with and comforting those who are suffering. You will find yourself counseling people through broken marriages, visiting people in hospital, praying with people at their death beds, burying their loved ones. And you will do this over and over and over again. When you minister to the flock of Jesus Christ that God has sent you to serve as shepherds, you will not be Job's friends; rather, you will be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ, helping those you serve to bear their burdens, helping to carry them through their sorrows.

The Roman Catholic priest Henry Nouwen wrote in a book entitled *The Wounded Healer* that it is only those who are consciously aware of their own struggles with suffering, sadness, and inadequacy who can emphasize with and comfort those who are suffering. As we in our own way have come to share in Christ's sufferings, so with God's help and only through his grace, can we bring comfort to others who suffer. I conclude with the words of the apostle Paul:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too." (2 Cor. 1:3-5)

So, no. *Everything* does not "stink." Certainly suffering and death stink. But Jesus Christ has kicked their butts through the power of his resurrection! In the apostle Paul's words, "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all

creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 8:37-39)

Why the Resurrection of Jesus Makes a Difference

Acts 3:12-19

Luke 24:36-48

1 John 3:1-7



When I was in my teens and early twenties, Evangelicals were not known for writing great systematic theology. What they were known for was apologetics, which fit in with their focus on evangelism. My first introduction to the realm of Christian thought was in the field of apologetics. I read everything I could get my hands on by writers like C. S. Lewis, but also by writers I'm sure most of you have never heard of. When I first started reading real Systematic Theologians, it was largely because of their apologetic value. I liked Thomas Aquinas because of his Five Ways to demonstrate the existence of God. I liked Wolfhart Pannenberg because of his arguments for the resurrection of Jesus. I was rather proud of my abilities as an

apologist and was convinced that I could prove that Christianity was true based on irrefutable arguments for the existence of God and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

One summer I was working one of those temporary jobs you get to pay your way through school and I got to know a young man my own age who had grown up Episcopalian, had been an acolyte when he was a teenager, and was now an atheist. I was trying to convince him that the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus was fairly solid, and he blurted out "What if someone could come up with a good argument that John F. Kennedy had risen from the dead? What difference would it make?" As you can imagine, my apologetic arguments had no influence whatsoever on this guy, and after the job ended, we lost track of one another, and I never saw him again.

I teach a course in Christian Apologetics here at Trinity, but my approach is now very different from what it was then. Karl Barth is supposed to have said somewhere that the best apologetics is good systematic theology, and I have come to agree. The problem with the apologetic approach that I first studied as a teenager is that it makes no real connection to the central subject matter of Christian faith. These days I am not particularly interested in the question of whether someone can make a rational argument for the existence of a first cause of the universe. I am much more interested in the question of whether the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ and who raised him from the dead exists. It's not that I think that the traditional philosophical and historical arguments don't work. They are probably as valid as they ever were. However, I also think that young man who compared my apologetic arguments for the resurrection of Jesus to the case for the resurrection of John F. Kennedy had a point. The most important question is not whether there is a strong historical argument that a first century Jew named Jesus of Nazareth turned out to be alive three days after he was crucified. The really important question is whether the God who is the Father

of Jesus Christ the Son of God raised him from the dead.

This is, of course, the approach that the New Testament writings take to the resurrection of Jesus. The New Testament does not simply assert that there are good historical reasons to believe that a first century Jew named Jesus of Nazareth turned out to be mysteriously alive three days after having been crucified, but that the God who created the entire universe, the God who delivered the nation of Israel from bondage in Egypt and spoke to them over and over again through prophets and priests, that this God has raised this man from the dead, that this God is the Father of this Jesus who is his eternal Son become a human being, and this is remarkably good news for Jews and Gentiles alike because it has to do with the purpose and destiny of the entire creation. And that makes a huge difference!

So what difference does it make if Jesus of Nazareth really rose from the dead? Why would we care about a living Jesus more than a living John F. Kennedy? Let's look at this morning's lectionary readings.

First, the resurrection means that Jesus is the clue to all of history – past, present, and future – and to the future of the entire universe. The lectionary readings this morning begin by connecting the resurrection of Jesus to Israel's past. In Peter's sermon in Acts, he tells his listeners: "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus," (Acts 3:13) and a little later "But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled" (Acts 3:18). In the gospel passage in Luke, the risen Jesus appears to his disciples and proclaims "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44). So the resurrection of Jesus points back to the past of God's

covenant with his people Israel. At the end of the Acts passage, Peter tells his hearers: "You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness" (Acts 3:25-26). The resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises that God had made to his people Israel.

But the resurrection of Jesus also points to the future, not simply of Israel, but of the entire universe. Peter's sermon not only looks to the past history of Israel, but looks forward to God's promise of Christ's return and the restoration of all creation: "that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago" (Acts 3:20-21).

And then the resurrection not only points back to the past of Israel, and to Jesus' future return, but to that distant past when, according to the book of Acts, God created the entire universe through the Son who would be incarnate as Jesus. Peter accuses his hearers: "you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 3:15). The paradox in this passage was later echoed by the Anglican poet George Herbert, "Hark, how they cry aloud still, *Crucify. It is not fit he live a day*, they cry, Who cannot live less than eternally." (George Herbert, "The Sacrifice")

If this Jesus who was crucified was raised from the dead, if this risen Jesus is himself the Author of Life, then the resurrection of Jesus provides the clue to all of history and the purpose and meaning of the very universe. The resurrection of Jesus looks back to the history of Israel and the beginning of creation, but it also looks forward to the universality of the entire human race and to the future of all creation. Despair is the opposite of hope because it is the fear of non-

being and purposelessness. The resurrection of Jesus leads to faith rather than despair because it is the overcoming of death and the threat of non-being. The resurrection of Jesus gives reason for hope because it says that there is a God who created the universe, and that the universe has a purpose and a future.

However, we live in a particularly hopeless time, an age of cynicism and distrust. This leads to the second reason why the resurrection of Jesus makes a difference. The good news of the resurrection is that when the risen Jesus Christ appears to his disciples, he speaks words of peace, not words of condemnation.

The resurrection is a corrective to the corrosive cynicism of our age. For the last couple of decades, we have been told that we are living in the era of post-modernity. Post-modernity was largely a reaction to the facile optimism of the era of modernity. The promises of equality and freedom that were supposed to be the inevitable consequences of modern Western democracies and modern economics never arrived. Modernity did not bring about a new world.

One of the wrenches in the tool box of post-modernity is the methodology of suspicion, distrust of those who promise to make things better. Post-modernity tells us to beware of those who claim to be high-minded. Power is about control, and promises to make things better are really disguised "grabs for power." What do those who make these promises hope to gain for themselves? Unfortunately, two decades of post-modernity has not made things better. Suspicion of those in power has only led to more suspicion. Just think of the gap between those who look forward to "Hope and change" and those who look backward to "Make America Great Again."

The resurrection of Jesus agrees with post-modernity in that it is not naïve about the corruption of power. Jesus was crucified by those who were in charge of things. Jewish

religious leaders joined together with the puppet representative of the occupying Roman army to do away with a troublesome young prophet from Galilee. No doubt they thought they were making things better.

The followers of Jesus had every right to be cynical; they had every right to be disappointed, and they had every right to be disillusioned. Their hopes had been disappointed. Jesus had failed in his mission. They were afraid for their own lives, that they could end up as Jesus did, on Roman crosses. Finally, they were disappointed in themselves. With the exception of a few women and the beloved disciple who stayed by the side of the mother of Jesus, Jesus' followers had fled and deserted the crucified Jesus in his hour of need. When push came to shove, even Simon Peter, the disciple who had confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, denied three times that he knew him.

Yet the resurrection of Jesus goes beyond cynicism and distrust and fear in a way that post-modernity cannot. Notice the first words that the risen Jesus speaks to his discouraged and doubting disciples: "Peace be with you!" (Luke 24:36). When the disciples still doubted, when they were still afraid, the risen Jesus appeared and spoke to them: "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see" (Luke 24:38-39).

And what about the Jewish religious leaders themselves, those who had conspired with the help of Pontius Pilate to do away with Jesus? The apostle Peter pulls no punches in his sermon in this morning's lectionary reading: "[Y]ou denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 3:14-15). But Peter does not leave his hearers with a message of guilt and condemnation. Instead, Peter echoes the message of peace that Jesus spoke to his followers on Easter morning. Peter says to those he had just accused of

murdering the Author of Life, "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. . . . Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus . . ." (Acts 3:17, 19).

What difference does it make that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead? The difference is that the fear and doubt of Jesus' disciples, and even the unbelieving corruption of power by those who "killed the Author of life" leads not to condemnation and cynicism, but to something new, the promise of the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is a word that post-modernity does not understand and cannot use because it is a word that can only be pronounced by the risen Jesus Christ. Only the "Author of life" can restore to life those who have been either the victims of or the willing accomplices of the power of death.

And that leads to the third and the final way that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead makes a difference. The resurrection of Jesus means forgiveness not only for first century Jews, Greeks and Romans, but for everyone who has ever lived, even for you and me. The resurrection of Jesus means that all sinful human beings, those who betrayed Jesus by helping to nail him to the cross, those who have deserted and denied Christ like Simon Peter, even we ourselves who have failed, deserted, and denied Jesus Christ in so many ways, are loved by the God who created the universe, the Father who raised his Son Jesus from the dead. In the First Letter of John, we hear the words this morning: "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (1 John 3:1).

That the Father has shown his love for us means that we who have received Jesus Christ's forgiveness, who have heard his words "Peace be with you!" have a future. The author of 1 John writes, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will

be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). We have already seen that in his Acts sermon, Peter had preached that Jesus Christ would return to restore all things.

But the resurrection of Jesus also makes a difference for the present, in this time "between the times" of Jesus' resurrection and his return. In his appearance at the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus gives to his followers a mission, "that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). The risen Jesus said to his apostles, "You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48). As Jesus' resurrection means that we ourselves have heard the message of forgiveness, "Peace be with you!", so, like those first witnesses gathered in that room, we have the privilege to share that word of peace and forgiveness to others. As those who were gathered in that upper room were witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, so we also are witnesses that Jesus has risen from the dead and that makes a real difference.

And so we find ourselves hearing the words of the risen Jesus Christ: "Peace be with you!" With the apostle Peter in his sermon, we find ourselves saying "We too are witnesses of these things." Like the apostles to whom Jesus appeared in the upper room, we too have received the promised gift of the Holy Spirit in our midst, and we too await that day when the risen Lord Jesus Christ will return and make all things new.

So, yes. The resurrection of Jesus Christ does indeed make a difference. If the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ has raised his raised Son from the dead, it is the most important event, not only in human history, but in the history of the universe. It makes all the difference in the world.

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

1 Corinthians 8:1-13



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

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

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

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

and you're more than three times as likely to be a "none" than you are to be a mainline Protestant – a Lutheran, a Presbyterian, an Episcopalian or Anglican, a Congregationalist or a Methodist. Among millennials, while some raised in Christian traditions become "nones," the reverse is seldom the case. Those who are raised with no religious affiliation whatsoever stay that way. Growing up in a home without any religion is a good way of never becoming a member of any religious group.

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

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

alternative to secularism.⁴ While it might seem as if Dreher and Smith are on the same page, they have engaged in a rather public and nasty feud with one another recently with Smith strongly criticizing Dreher's new book, and Dreher saying that Smith is just angry because he didn't publish with Smith's publisher.⁵

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

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

gets lost.

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

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

So there is a tension that the church needs to maintain. On

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How then might what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians provide

guidance for us as we seem to be moving into a post-Christian culture? Should we listen to Rod Dreher or to Jamie Smith?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Difference of God and the Difference it Makes: A Sermon

Psalm 96.1-9(10-13)

Isaiah 45.1-7

1 Thess. 1.1-10

Mt. 22.15-22



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

community of reconciliation can be created.

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

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

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

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

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

Love Inseperable: A Sermon

Nehemiah 9:16-20

Psalm 78

Romans 8:35-39

Matthew 14:13-21



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

fulfills the covenant even when Israel fails to do so.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psalm 50

Luke 18:1-8



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

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

injustices committed against them by the other side.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Division and Reconciliation: A Sermon

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

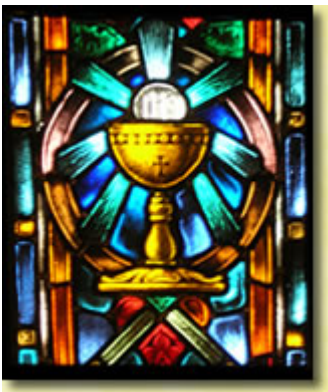
reader read from 1 Cor. 12, and proceeded as if it was supposed to be that way. It turns out that 1 Cor. 12 works just fine as the epistle reading along with the OT passage from Isaiah and the gospel from the Sermon on the Mount.

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 112

Matthew 5:13-20

1 Corinthians 12:1-16



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

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

believe.

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

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

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

The meaningful context for the passage is likely Isaiah 61:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

being might boast in the presence of God.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

histories, or even indifferent theological disagreements, are scandalous.

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

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

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

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

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

Defeat, Shame, Memory: A Sermon

Lamentations 1:1-6

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Psalm 137

Luke 17:5-10



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

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

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

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

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

morning's readings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Abounding in Thanksgiving: A Sermon on Prayer

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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