

Preaching Helps

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, July 7 —
St. Michael and All Angels, September 29, 2019

Ten Years Ago—The Day the ELCA Opened the Door to LGBT Pastors

On August 19, 2009, a tornado touched down in the city of Minneapolis near the Convention Center. Inside that building voting members at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) churchwide assembly were told to get away from windows and move to safer interior spaces. Across the street at Central Lutheran Church the tornado tossed tables and chairs that had been set up for an outdoor café. The tornado also twisted the cross on the spire of the church. Thankfully no one was injured as the storm gave way to peaceful skies. I had been invited to preach that night at Central for a service hosted by “Good Soil,” a movement within the ELCA that supported the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people (our language didn’t yet include bisexual and transgender). The sanctuary was packed, the mood was hopeful and the singing glorious. I got up to read Mark 4:35–41, the gospel chosen for that service. Jesus tells his disciples that they are going to take a boat to the other side of the sea. Then, verse 37: “A great windstorm arose...” The congregation burst out laughing. I waited until the laughter subsided. “That’s what it says,” I adlibbed. More laughter. Finally I was able to finish the reading and the sermon began.

I talked about how difficult it is to “go to the other side,” leaving the familiar behind and being afraid of what we’ll find over there. Many in the ELCA, from differing perspectives, echoed the disciples’ cry in the midst of the storm: “Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?” Then I turned to Jesus’ questions (excerpts from that sermon follow):

“**Why are you afraid?**” Jesus turns to us with the same question. We hardly know where to begin. Some fear the ELCA will recognize and support same-gender relationships; others fear the ELCA will not change at all and we will still be rejected. Many are confused, caught in the stormy middle. By now, we’ve heard all the debates and read endless reports and memorials. We know there is no consensus about human sexuality in this church.

There was a second part to Jesus’ question: “**Have you still no faith?**”—still, after all these centuries that Jesus has sustained the church? Only Jesus could calm the storm. Only Jesus can hold together what threatens to tear us apart. We already disagree on many things, things of great consequence—like sacraments. Some make fun of congregations that commune with little glasses; others refuse to drink from a common cup. Some disparage the practice of offering wine and grape juice along with gluten-free bread—“smorgasbord communion,” they call it. Some pastors reverence the elements while others think that’s idolatry. Some commune infants, while others do not. Yet one by one we come, reaching out our hands. “The body of Christ given for you” and we eat the bread, believing Jesus Christ is truly present. We worship with cranberry books, green books, red books, even black books—and some with no books... Yet St. Paul writes to each congregation saying: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” But some people say the changes recommended at this assembly are more critical than any we have faced before. Could that really be true?

There are ELCA congregations that would never call me because I am a lesbian in a publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous same-gender relationship. There are other ELCA congregations that would extend a call—though some members might say, “We were hoping for someone a bit younger!” Those of us who are gay or lesbian aren’t asking for special rights. We want to be judged by the same ethical norms as our straight sisters and brothers. I want to stay in this church that has been my lifelong home—not alone, but with my partner. In the recommendations before this assembly, people in these differing congregations promise to respect each other...

If we believe we must agree in order to stay together, then it is more honest to say:

- Our agreements about human sexuality are the source of our unity. OR
- Our interpretation of every verse of scripture is the source of our unity.

The unity of the church does not depend on our decisions; neither can we allow the call for unity to undermine God’s call for justice. This is not your church or mine, this is the church of Jesus Christ, the church that is given life not by the rightness of all our decisions but by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is with us in the boat. We can stay together even when we are afraid.

There is one last question in the text, this one asked by the disciples: **“Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”** This is Jesus, incarnate Word beyond all written words. This is Jesus who keeps sowing with abandon in places we never imagined going—including the other side of the sea. This is Jesus who loved us even unto death on the cross. He is not asleep—not in the back of the boat or in the sealed tomb. God woke him and raised him up forever. This is Jesus who desires life before death for everyone. This is Jesus who holds us together when our own efforts fail.

When the sea seems far too wide,
When I fear the other side,
When my hope has almost died—
Give me Jesus.

Give me Jesus. Give me Jesus.
You can have all the rest.
Give me Jesus.

And everyone joined in singing the refrain. A bit later we all came forward with outstretched hands: “The body of Christ given for you. The blood of Christ shed for you.”

The next day, **August 20, 2009**, the assembly voted on the document, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust.” Like all ELCA social statements it required a two-thirds vote to pass. Presiding Bishop Hanson called for prayer and urged voting members not to applaud or shout no matter the decision. The huge hall became very quiet. People pushed the buttons on the electronic voting machines. Soon the vote appeared on the screen: exactly the 66.6 percent needed for passage. There were audible gasps, but no one applauded or cheered. There were many tears around the voters’ tables and in the visitors’ section where I was sitting. Bishop Hanson then addressed the assembly as pastor to this divided congregation. He shared a Bible verse for each group: those who felt the church had abandoned them, those who felt fully included for the first time, those who were confused, those who were called to ministry but had been denied, and groups I cannot now remember. He knew each biblical text well, almost from memory. It was a holy moment. We should all have taken off our shoes.

The approval of this social statement and the accompanying recommendations for ministry opened the way for the ordination of partnered gay and lesbian persons in the ELCA. This summer we mark the tenth anniversary of that decision. Hundreds of LGBT people have now been ordained or are in seminary. (Our language now includes Bisexual and Transgen-

der people.) There are 339 members of Proclaim, an organization for LGBT pastors, deacons, and seminarians willing to be public about their sexuality. There are some LGBT pastors who have chosen not to be part of Proclaim so it is difficult to know the exact total. But it’s quite clear that at least 300 congregations now have pastors because of that decision ten years ago.

Of course, that vote in 2009 didn’t happen in a vacuum. Many years of struggle and pain, hurt and creativity, activism and legislative acumen preceded that vote ten years ago. This year is also the **forty-fifth anniversary of Lutherans Concerned** (now Reconciling Works). On June 16–17, 1974, five brave gay and lesbian Lutherans met at the University of Minnesota. We should at least know their names: Allen Blaich (“Bly”), Howard Erickson, Diane Fraser, Marie Kent, and the Rev. Jim Lokken. They had been invited by the Rev. Jim Siefkes, Director of Discovering Ministries of the American Lutheran Church. He felt strongly that the church needed to hear from homosexual persons (the language of the time) and stop causing oppression and harm. Those five Lutherans started a group called **Lutherans Concerned for Gay People**. They also published a newsletter *The Gay Lutheran*. Their logo was the Luther rose, because, as Howard Erickson said, “We are Lutheran, we are not outside the church, this is our church, too.”¹ That meeting forty-five years ago—just five years after Stonewall—was the beginning of the long road to a justice for LGBT people in at least part of the Lutheran family. Along the way the organization changed its name to Lutherans Concerned, then Lutherans Concerned North America (to reflect Canadian participation), and now Reconciling Works. There isn’t room here to recount the history of the LGBTQ movement in the Lutheran church since 1974—but someone should write this very moving history! Other groups joined with Lutherans Concerned over the years: Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministry (supporting the unauthorized ordinations of gay and lesbian pastors in San Francisco and beyond); Extraordinary Candidacy Project (a parallel track for LGBT seminarians who refused to be closeted); Lutheran Network for Inclusive Vision (straight and gay people giving public support for ordination of LGBT people); Good Soil (a counterpoint to “Solid Rock,” a group opposed to policy change), and many efforts within congregations and synods. The Reconciling in Christ program of Lutherans Concerned has reached out to hundreds of congregations encouraging them to offer LGBTQ people a more genuine welcome than posting “All Are Welcome” on their outdoor bulletin board!

As we mark these two anniversaries, we remember brave congregations who called LGBT pastors without authorization; we remember pastors who were “removed from the roster” (a

1. Jeannine Johnson, ed., “Lutherans Concerned for Gay People: The Beginning” (prepared for the Lutherans Concerned assembly in June 2008).

benign phrase for being defrocked); we remember candidates who were never approved because of who they are, and we remember those who died without ever being themselves in the church they loved and served. Hopefully, every ELCA congregation will include some of these remembrances in the Prayers of Intercession and Thanksgiving.

To mark this tenth anniversary, I have invited thirteen LGBT pastors who are members of Proclaim to reflect on the lectionary texts for this issue of *Currents*. Almost all of them have written for *Preaching Helps* in the past and we welcome them back. We also welcome **Emmy Kegler** and **Amanda Gerken-Nelson** who are new to these pages. I am grateful to each of these pastors for their insights on the texts and for their ministry in congregations, seminaries, and church-related organizations.

Joel Bergeland is a pastor at Mount Olivet Lutheran Church of Plymouth, in Plymouth, Minnesota, where his work currently involves figuring out with his congregation how they can be better neighbors to their surrounding community. He lives in Minneapolis with his husband and their two cats and one dog. **Brenda Bos** serves a small ELCA congregation in south Orange County, California. Her church worships on the beach every Sunday morning, welcoming one-time visitors and transients as well as long-time members. “We know there are always people who attend that one time and move on, so we’ve got a sense of urgency. We must deliver the gospel in our worship.” She and her wife, Janis, met and adopted their son, Joshua, when he was fifteen years old. **Erik Christensen** is Pastor to the Community and Director of Worship at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC). Before coming to LSTC, Erik was pastor with St. Luke’s Lutheran Church of Logan Square in Chicago. Erik is a frequent contributor to *Sundays and Seasons* and has written for *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship* (2012) and *In These or Similar Words: Crafting Language for Worship* (2015). He lives in Chicago with his husband, Kerry. **Caleb Crainer** (he/him/his) serves as pastor at St. Andrew’s Lutheran Church in Los Angeles, California. He is a product of Valparaiso University, Graduate Theological Union, Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest, 4 billion years of evolution, friends, and parents. You might find Pastor Caleb playing the tuba, attending science lectures, or on the kickball field—but not at the same time. **Kari Lipke** and **Joanne Engquist** serve as pastors in downtown Seattle among the people gathered as Gethsemane Lutheran Church and The Garden. In their sacred, ordinary life together—in marriage and in ministry—they seek to be encouragers of life, in love and service toward God and all the world of God’s loving. **Brad Froslee** serves as senior pastor at St. Michael’s Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minnesota. Besides pastoring, Brad enjoys time with husband, Bill, and their son, Torin,

at their home in Minneapolis or while doing some global-trekking. He also loves doing genealogy, writing poetry, and getting out on the lakes to waterski. Brad has served on the boards for Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries and OutFront Minnesota; the past two years he has had the privilege of serving as a liturgist for the Festival of Homiletics. **Amanda Gerken-Nelson** is the Executive Director of Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries, an organization that advocates for and supports LGBTQIA+ seminarians and rostered ministers in the Lutheran church. Prior to 2009 LGBTQIA+ leaders were ordained extraordinarily through its Extraordinary Candidacy Project. An ordained minister in the ELCA, Amanda previously served as the pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in East Hartford, Connecticut. She currently resides in the beautiful state of Maine with her wife and assures us that there are some Lutherans there. **Jeff Johnson** is lead pastor at University Lutheran Chapel of Berkeley. On January 20, 1990, in San Francisco, Jeff was ordained *extra ordinem* (outside the rule), along with Pastors Ruth Frost and Phyllis Zillhart. It was a provocative action in a long movement of resistance to the ELCA policies of discrimination and harassment. Jeff helped create and foster the organizations and communities now known as Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries and PROCLAIM. **Emmy Kegler** is the pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Northeast Minneapolis and the founder and editor of *Queer Grace*, an encyclopedia of online resources around LGBTQ life and faith (queergrace.com). She is also one of three co-leaders of the Queer Grace Community, a group of LGBTQ+ Christians in the Twin Cities who meet for worship, Bible study, and fellowship. She lives in Saint Paul and enjoys biking, board games, books, and spending time with her wife, Michelle, and their two dogs and cat. **Jen Nagel** serves as lead pastor of University Lutheran Church of Hope in Minneapolis. She was ordained extra-ordinarily through Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries (ELM), prior to ELCA policy change. Jen and her spouse, the Rev. Jane McBride, share love, parenting (raising two bright and spunky daughters), pastoring, and plenty of summer-time adventures. **Miriam Samuelson-Roberts** is associate pastor at Westwood Lutheran Church in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, and co-host of the podcast Alter Guild. She graduated from Yale Divinity School and is a member of Proclaim, a group for LGBTQIA rostered leaders in the ELCA. She lives in Minneapolis with her husband, Daniel, and daughter, Esther. **Peter Carlson Schattauer** serves as the associate pastor at Advent Lutheran Church in Maple Grove, Minnesota. A graduate of St. Olaf College and Yale Divinity School, Peter’s ministry focuses on the connection between worship and life in the world as well as creating spaces for young adults to explore their faith and inquire after God. In his free time, he enjoys reading, swimming, and spending time with friends. **Javen Swanson** is associate pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where he has

served since 2014. Javen lives in Saint Paul with his husband, the Rev. Oby Ballinger.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, "Preaching Helps"

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost July 7, 2019

Isaiah 66:10–14

Psalms 66:1–9

Galatians 6:(1–6) 7–16

Luke 10:1–11, 16–20

Isaiah 66 gives us beautiful maternal imagery. Israelites returning from the Babylonian exile are to rejoice in Jerusalem, for they will “nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast,” and be “dandled on her knees.” It’s not just the city that’s maternal—God promises that “as a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.” Giving a mother’s comfort to these returning exiles is no small task. They carry with them the trauma of forced migration, and they have been living in a land that has told them their culture, language, and religion—deep marks of their identity—were inferior. What kind of a God would want to wade into this tangle of woundedness? What kind of a God could bear suffering this deep? Only a God who knows what it means to mother. This is not a sentimental picture of motherhood—Isaiah uses maternal imagery to show the strength of God’s love and the depth of God’s desire to bring healing.

Psalms 66 speaks twice of “all the earth” worshipping and praising God. As in other psalms (notably 148), all that God has made praises God simply by existing as the very thing God created it to be. The psalmist looks at mountains, whales, cacti, and insects going about their business and hears praise rising to the Creator. But this psalm is more than a testimony to some nebulous creative force, or a God in general. The psalmist sees all creation as worshipping the God who opted for human freedom, turning the sea into dry land so the Hebrew people could escape their oppressors in Egypt. If all things praise God by being their created selves, God’s intervention in human history to break the yoke of oppression means that humans best praise God when they are free from systems of domination and bondage.

The passage from Galatians seems scattered (Paul makes an aside about his handwriting) and even contradictory (“bear one another’s burdens” vs. “all must carry their own loads”). But at the heart is Paul’s pleading to understand that, because of the cross of Jesus, “the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Faith in Christ ought to make a difference in our living—no longer are we bound by the ways of the world that encourage selfish hoarding and violence. Instead, we join the

“new creation” in Christ, set free to “work for the good of all.”

Paul talks about these opposing ways in terms of “flesh” and “Spirit,” but this is not a wholesale dismissal of our bodies and the wisdom they contain. The problem arises when we “sow to [our] own flesh,” shrinking our sphere of concern to ourselves alone and forgetting to consider the flesh of others. But joined to the love of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, we are enlightened to see how the flourishing of our own life is caught up in the flourishing of the lives of others, and thus we do not “grow weary in doing what is right.”

The Gospel text presents Jesus commissioning seventy followers to go proclaim the kingdom of God. There are several elements to Jesus’ instructions that would seem to undermine this mission’s success. The disciples must travel extremely lightly, sent out exposed and vulnerable, like “lambs into the midst of wolves.” They must depend on others for lodging and food, risking becoming a burden or getting run out of town. Finally, the disciples are not sent to powerful, influential decision-makers, but to those who are sick and possessed by demons—often people already living in poverty whose condition has further isolated them.

But this way of travelling is essential to the message Jesus asks them to bring: “The Kingdom of God has come near.” This Kingdom is made known in the giving and receiving of hospitality, in shared meals, in the refusal to live as though you can rely solely on yourself. It does not fear looking at others’ suffering, and it wishes peace to those who reject it. It has the strength to cast out demons, yet it does not rejoice in its own power, but only that God’s presence is near.

These readings share a theme of the larger, fuller life we partake of when we join in community. This is about as bread and butter as it gets for most of our sermons about what church life is and ought to be, but, notably, none of the readings speak exclusively about the community of faith. They are about the city, the earth, the good of all, and strangers who would welcome us in. How might you invite congregants to drink from the “glorious bosom” of your city, or to observe the ecosystems around them as praising God? What does it mean to ask congregants to proclaim God’s reign by seeking welcome in the homes of their neighbors instead of focusing on welcoming new folks into membership at your church?

These texts contain the power to upend some long-held assumptions much of the American church has made about where God dwells, and which direction we must face in order to encounter this God. For they proclaim a God who is active not just in our churches, but in our sharing, in our striving for freedom, healing and the common good, and in creation itself. God is active in all places—what good news!

Joel Bergeland

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost July 14, 2019

Deuteronomy 30:9–14

Psalms 25:1–10

Colossians 1:1–14

Luke 10:25–37

Jesus tells a story about a human one (*anthropos*) on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho who is overcome and left for dead along the path. This *anthropos* is a literary “everyhuman” and just as the lawyer finds himself in the story as an Israelite, we should see ourselves in the story. It is about each of us and how we see ourselves in relationship to those around us, those close to us, but more to the point, those we don’t really want very much to do with. Jesus calls these people neighbors.

“What must I do (*poieo*) to inherit eternal life?” asks the canon lawyer (*nomikos*).

He may just be interested in afterlife, but chances are that this expert in the law of Moses (*nomos, torah*) is thinking more broadly about life lived well, the totality and completeness of living well, “abundantly, exceedingly prosperous” (*yathar*), “in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil; “prospering” (*tov*) [Deut 30:9].

In the letter to the Colossians this kind of well-lived life is formed by “the word of truth, the gospel” (*logos aletheia euaggelion*). It is a living “worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Christ, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God.”

Bishop Stanley E. Olsen of blessed memory (Pacific Southwest Synod, LCA) used to remind us that this was all that could be asked of trustworthy servants in the church.

Torah calls this kind of living “turning to God with all your heart (*lavav*) and soul (*nefesh*)” and centering on love of neighbor (*plesion*) as the canon lawyer tells Jesus.

It’s not a cheeky follow-up question from *nomikos* to Jesus. “Who is my *plesion*?” It’s a proximity question. *Plesion* is usually translated “neighbor” in the text, but it can also be rendered “fellow,” or “compatriot” or *compañero/compañera*, which highlights the proximity issue.

The priest and Levite, as Jesus tells the story, are clearly *compañeros/compañeras* of the “everyhuman” Israelite canon lawyer. These are compatriots who are close enough culturally that they could have studied Torah in the same libraries, eaten around the same tables, prayed in the same sacred spaces.

The “everyhuman” Israelite would have welcomed assistance from these recognizable comrades on the journey. But they keep going on the road. The first surprise in the story is that those who are clearly neighbor to the broken Israelite on the side of the road—the priest and the Levite—don’t stop.

Neighbors are *compañeros/compañeras* in eternal life. But

Jesus is not just talking about those closest to you.

Loving neighbor is hard enough when you think only about the people you live, study, pray, and eat with. But what about those you think of as adversaries of your clan?

The second surprise is who shows up and actually stops. It’s not someone from the expected inner cultural circle. With respect to Israelite canon lawyers, *Samaritans* are not proximate at all. Few would suggest they are neighbor without agitating the listeners. Jesus draws in a neighbor from beyond culture and clan. The one who stops is Samaritan, which would have startled and most likely offended the listeners, but also the *anthropos* Israelite in the ditch.

We could think of communities we know who have adversarial relationships: Bosnian Serbs and Muslims, Rwandan Hutu and Tutsi, Palestinians and Israelis. The antipathy between Israelites and Samaritans reverberates through the enmity in these intercultural relationships.

But it’s not just about other communities. It’s about our difficult relationships. What face would be difficult to see stooping over you to save you from your brokenness? From whom would it be difficult to receive assistance or kindness or compassion? From whom would you draw back and recoil were you to open your distressed eyes and find them reaching down to pull you up? Whom would you not include in your circle of *compañeros/compañeras* in life, not even thinking about eternal life?

In Jesus’ story you might notice that the Samaritan delivers the broken *anthropos* Israelite to an inn (*pandocheion*). It’s not the same word used earlier in Luke’s gospel for the guest house from which the pregnant Holy Family are turned away for lack of space. In this case, *inn* translates literally to “all are welcome.” This is an “all are welcome” place of hospitality and healing, respite and rest, wholeness and renewal.

When she celebrates the Eucharist, my friend and colleague, the Rev. Phyllis Zillhart ends each table blessing with the phrase, “live in forgiveness, claim your wholeness, dwell in peace.” I can see these words over the door to the *all-are-welcome inn*. Were we to look through the window of this inn, we just might catch a glimpse of Beloved Community. A place where Samaritans and Israelites, Serbs and Muslims, Hutu and Tutsi, Palestinians and Israelis commingle and create eternal life out of brokenness and brutality. A place where you might break bread together with your new *compañeros/compañeras* in abundant life. A place where we are all transformed by mercy and unconditional loving kindness.

Concluding Note

As I write these reflections, we are well into the spring thaw. Our climate-crisis-altered planet is melting faster than before at the earth’s highest elevations. On Mount Everest the spring melt is uncovering the dead bodies of hikers who collapsed on

their way to the summit, their corpses left alongside the path. This year, with a crush of too many climbers, many woefully inexperienced, and traffic jams along the narrow path to the summit, more people have collapsed in distress. They have been left to die by others who hike past them, continuing their trek up the mountain. “I cannot believe what I saw up there,” one climber posted. “Death. Carnage. Chaos. Lineups. Dead bodies on the route and in tents at camp 4. People who I tried to turn back who ended up dying. Everything you read in the sensational headlines all played out on our summit night.”²

It’s not enough to turn these news stories into morality tales, which is what we usually do with the stories like the Good Samaritan. Perhaps instead they can cause us to think more deeply about our manner of living together on this planet and the ways we see and don’t want to see our neighbors all around us. What does eternal life mean alongside them?

Jeff R. Johnson

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost July 21, 2019

Genesis 18:1–10a

Psalm 15

Colossians 1:15–28

Luke 10:38–42

Engaging the Texts

For congregations using the “complementary” Old Testament readings, the theme of “attending angels unawares” (Hebrews 13:2) springs clearly into focus. The lectionary cuts off the Genesis reading at 10a, a rather abrupt place to end. Detail-oriented readers might note that the same story in Pentecost Year A continues through verse 15, along with adding chapter 21 to show the fulfillment of the messengers’ promise. This particular pericope, in ending at 10a, thus forces our focus onto the hospitality shown. Keen students of Greek and Roman mythology might notice a connection to Ovid’s tale of Baucis and Philemon, the elderly couple who show hospitality to a disguised Zeus and Hermes. The myth bears strains both of this hospitable welcome and the judgment pronounced on Sodom in the rest of the chapter, likely indicating a cross-cultural oral tradition that sought to answer questions such as: “How did this [temple/set of trees/lineage of Abraham] come to be?” and “What will be the reward for those who show generous hospitality?” Here, the reward is

clear: the long-promised nation and descendants of Abraham (this is the fourth time it is promised) finally has a concrete date of fulfillment.

A divine message cloaked in humanity reveals itself again in the Colossians reading. Here the focus shifts from the invisible God revealed in the visible Christ, to Christ’s body and glory now shown in the people of the early Christian church. Worth noting is the fully embodied work of Christ in “making peace through the blood of his cross,” in sharp contrast to the Pax Romana peddled by the empire, which sought to *force* peace through the crucifixion of any who opposed it. This potential play on words maintains the theme throughout the lectionary texts of a concrete and “fleshly” (*sarkos*) presence of the divine.

The enfleshed presence of God appears again in the story of Martha and Mary, where the incarnate Word of God experiences a reception both of home-based hospitality and mind-based discipleship. Considering the centuries of conflation, it may be wise for preachers to familiarize themselves with the other appearances of the sisters (John 11:1–12:11), especially the radical act in which Mary wipes Jesus’ feet with her hair, along with the parallel stories of pre-arrest anointing by an unnamed woman (Matt 26:6–13, Mark 14:3–9) and the unnamed “sinful woman” who shows hospitality where a religious leader fails to (Luke 7:36–50). What is this particular rendition of Jesus welcomed and served trying to communicate? We find echoes of Baucis and Philemon here again, but now service to the hidden God is bound up with attentive listening. Hospitality is the role of some, but not necessitated for all.

Pastoral Reflections

There is much to be plumbed pastorally and prophetically in stories of a hidden God. How do we attend to our invisible still present around us? Lutherans in particular can be shy in speaking of personal inspiration, of “messages from God,” yet we attest to them in Scripture and likely share pews with those who have received, in large or small ways, a word of promise inexplicable without divine reference. What language do we offer to speak of how we experience “messages from God” now? We might offer a hermeneutic for discernment: how such a message aligns with Christian canon, how it moves us to compassionate service for our neighbor, if it is true for a particular place and person (as was the very specific prophecy to Abraham) or for all times and peoples. We serve in a world still rich with divine proclamation; what framework do we offer for interpreting it?

Another pastoral and prophetic dimension to this Sunday is the stark contrast between hospitality as extended in the ancient Near East and the diversity of hospitalities active in the world today. The cultural hospitality expected in communities struggling to survive oppressive regimes, warring tribal factions, and a harsh desert climate reflect how, at our core, we need

2. May 28, 2019, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/28/walking-over-bodies-mountaineers-describe-the-carnage-at-the-top-of-mount-everest>

to care for each other. The majority of us, especially American Christians, have the privilege to believe we are freed from such interdependence. How do biblical practices of hospitality, especially to strangers, critique and challenge our individualism today? What small seeds of hospitality toward those “unlike us” might we begin to sow in our members and congregations? What does true hospitality look like now, both in church and in the whole world?

In centering the importance of hospitality in this Sunday’s texts, we should be particularly attentive to the roles played by Martha and Mary. Too often Jesus’ words have been turned into a cudgel against women and others who choose service-oriented roles. Jesus is rejecting the social norms of his day in which Mary should be shamed for failing her household duties, but in saying Mary has chosen “the better part,” we should be cautious of reading in condemnation of what Martha has chosen. Instead, we might step into a two-handed read of the importance of hospitality: both as charity extended toward the stranger but also space made for the self to sit, learn, and grow. For true discipleship, we need not only an open heart and mind but also open hands to serve the needs of those from whom we learn. Even in the revolution, someone still needs to do the dishes.

Emmy Kegler

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 28, 2019

Genesis 18:20–32

Psalms 138

Colossians 2:6–15 (16–19)

Luke 11:1–13

Ah, the Lord’s Prayer! Let’s break down the petitions and talk about God’s graciousness in our physical, spiritual, and social worlds. Let’s pick one of dozens of books on this most beloved prayer, pick a petition or two to preach on and make a meal out of it. Done!

Or we can ask ourselves harder questions: What do these texts tell us about the nature of God? What did Jesus know about God through prayer? What did Abraham know about God through prayer?

What struck me in this reading of the Lord’s Prayer text was the fact the disciples asked Jesus how to pray in the first place. It’s likely these men were fairly devout Jews. They would have been taught their prayers. But they must have seen something different in the way Jesus was praying. It was heartfelt and intimate. There was an expectation that God would actually listen and respond. Jesus referred to God as “Abba,” literally “Daddy” or “Papa” and the disciples came to realize they were praying at a rudimentary level and Jesus was communing with

God in a much deeper level.

So, what understanding of God does Jesus teach us in this passage? You can easily preach on the Lord’s Prayer and everyone goes home happy. It’s familiar, it’s well-loved. Great.

Or maybe you can focus on the “knock and it shall be opened” encouragement. How delightful. Seeking, finding, knocking, that’ll preach.

But what about the story Jesus tells in the middle of the Luke passage? The one where Jesus encourages us to pray like a desperate man looking for bread in the middle of the night? That is not exactly the tender image we conjure up when asking our loving Parent for our daily bread. Interestingly, this man’s need isn’t even for himself, but for his unexpected guests. He wants to be hospitable and generous, and needs help. He doesn’t want his graciousness to be inadequate. How might our prayer life change if this were our starting point, rather than self-serving petitions?

But what does this story tell us about the nature of God? Jesus describes God as a cranky neighbor, already locked in their room for the night, children in bed with them. We have to pound on the door to get God’s attention, and then God only helps because we were annoying. Where’s the loving Parent in *that* tale?

What if the preacher admits sometimes it *does* feel like God has favorite children, already wrapped in God’s bosom, while the rest of us are out in the cold hoping for a table scrap? What if Jesus is acknowledging that “outsider” position in our prayer life, hoping to grab a sleeping, well-fed, cozy God’s attention in the middle of our dark night?

Perhaps Jesus experienced this more than most. Jesus spent hours praying. Was it because He had so much to share with God? Or was it because Jesus knew the feeling of knocking on God’s door and waiting and waiting for God to get out of bed and answer?

And what did Abraham know about prayer? This Genesis passage features Abraham showing remarkable *chutzpah*, literally negotiating the demise of Sodom and Gomorrah with God. Abraham was confident he could engage God in this way, daring to be insolent and persistent. Taking liberties, “pushing it.” This is *before* God stops him from sacrificing Isaac, so it’s not like Abraham has come to understand the true trustworthiness of God. And yet, we can be sure this conversation, this argument between Abraham and God, will shape their relationship forever.

God expects relationship, possibly even equal partnership. Remember the covenant God made with Abraham: I will be your God and you will be my people. There are two parts to the partnership. I will give you land and prodigy, God promises, and you will worship me alone. You’ll get circumcised. You’ll obey me. You’ll go where I tell you to go and it will be well with you. But we are in this together. Abraham demonstrates

a relationship that is much more mutual, and therefore riskier than the listener might expect.

The Colossians passage is a wonderful testament to who we are in Jesus Christ—spiritually circumcised, which we understand to mean “set apart” like circumcision sets Jews apart. I assume this passage is added into this lectionary for two reasons—the circumcision reference ties it to Abraham, and possibly the forgiveness of trespasses mentioned in verse 13 connects to the forgiveness prayed for in the Lord’s Prayer.

In any case, Paul is reminding us that we are made different through Jesus Christ. Our baptism sets us apart. But it is a private distinction. We cannot tell by looking at a person that they are baptized, much like we cannot tell if a (clothed!) person is circumcised. I’m reminded of the promises people inscribe on the inside of rings. Only the wearer and the giver know the secret. What secrets do only God and the baptized know and how might those secrets become manifest in our service to the world? What deep relationship can we nurture through the types of prayers taught here?

Brenda Bos

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost August 4, 2019

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12–14; 2:18–23

Psalms 49:1–12

Colossians 3:1–11

Luke 12:13–21

Engaging the Texts

When we first encounter the **Ecclesiastes** text, it’s hard to know if it is actually what our tradition has called “wisdom” or a rant from someone jaded by life. Is the opening line of this passage a cry of lament realizing that life itself is all pointless? Or, is it an ecstatic pronouncement of liberation and release from expectations? If it is more the latter, what a wonderfully queer idea: that there is joy in recognizing the impermanence of that for which we have toiled and strained (v. 22). I wonder what kind of inflection your lector will use when reading this text in worship?

The NRSV introduction to **Psalms 49** is very leading: “The Folly of Trust in Riches.” I certainly hear a caution from the psalmist about placing all my trust in wealth as the editors suggest. What’s more, I hear a caution about thinking I can place myself over and above my neighbor. Regardless of my wealth, the language I speak, the gender of the person I love, my country of origin, the color of my skin—doesn’t death also knock on my door? Does my place in the world say something about me to God? Does it say something about how God loves me? What are the ways we position ourselves over and above

our neighbors?

Verses 5–6 of this **Colossians** text are the kind that give LGBTQIA+ people the shivers. It’s these kinds of texts that have so often been used against us. Yet, just two verses later, I want to make a banner with the words: “get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.” It’s amazing how a verse that liberates was likely scribbled with the same pen as one that inflicts pain and harm. What does this text tell us about Paul and the authority he held? How might Paul’s audience have felt hearing these words of admonition from him? How might your congregation interpret these words coming *from you*?

In the **Luke** text is Jesus saying that being wealthy is morally wrong? It’s easy to interpret this scripture thus: “Jesus is saying that being rich isn’t good. The opposite of rich is poor and therefore being poor is best.” But, is that the crux of Jesus’ message? We often read scripture in this binary way because our society functions using binaries: good and bad, wealthy and poor, man and woman, etc. Often there is a hierarchy within these binaries and one of those in the pair has a higher value in society than the other. If we don’t liberate ourselves from this binary way of thinking we might overlook Jesus’ point which, to me, is expressed more directly in vs. 31: “Instead, strive for God’s kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.”

Pastoral Reflections

I surprised myself while writing “Engaging the Texts” for this commentary: I found myself getting defensive over what Jesus and some of the other authors were saying and felt compassion for those with wealth and money. What? Me?

In general, I struggle with our highly capitalistic, consumption-based society and I think our culture over-values wealth. I think capitalism is a system that works well for very few. For the most part it is a system that succeeds by taking advantage of the “least of these” (Matt 25:40). Normally, I would happily lift my voice in reading a text that might bring a word of justice to a space of discrimination: “Yes, Jesus! You’re right! Down with the 1%!” But, instead, I found myself asking, “Are not the wealthy also deserving of God’s love and grace?”

Perhaps it’s because I was asked to write this commentary as a queer pastor in celebration of the tenth anniversary of policy change allowing partnered LGBT pastors and deacons to serve in the ELCA. Perhaps I was reading and reacting to the texts at the beginning of June, LGBTQIA+ Pride month. Perhaps I reacted so strongly because I, too, have found myself on the other side of hurtful, harmful scriptural interpretations.

Yes, it’s all of these—and more!

What’s your relationship to money and how does it affect how you respond to Jesus’ parable? In her book, *Bad With Money: The Imperfect Art of Getting Your Financial Sh*t Together*, author and podcast host, Gabby Dunn, titles the very

first chapter of her book: “Your roots are showing.” She writes, “In order to start deconstructing and fixing your own ways of thinking about money, you need to dig into the past and see what you were taught—consciously and subconsciously.”³ How is your money narrative affecting how you read and react to Jesus’ lesson? What’s the narrative for the people in your pews?

From which direction do you read this text? Do you read this text from a position of financial power and privilege? Or, do you and your family live more paycheck to paycheck? What about your congregation? I honestly wonder how some of our colleagues who promote a prosperity gospel would preach these texts.

Money is about as taboo a topic as sex—but Jesus and our faithful ancestors talked about money far more than sex. What is the bold word of grace and liberation you hear Jesus speaking to your community about money and wealth on this day?

Amanda Gerken-Nelson

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost August 11, 2019

Genesis 15:1–6

Psalm 33:12–22

Hebrews 11:1–3, 8–16

Luke 12:32–40

Both the Genesis and Luke texts begin with the encouragement, “Do not be afraid.” In the Genesis story, though, Abram *is* afraid—afraid that he will die and leave no real legacy, nothing concrete, no heirs. But God reassures Abram, taking him outside and directing him to look to the stars. The stars—something Abram can see—stand in for something he cannot yet see: God’s promise to him fulfilled. As the text from Hebrews reminds us, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Stargazing with God brings Abram back to faith, that ability to trust what he cannot yet see. Ultimately, releasing his fear, Abram follows God’s invitation onto an unknown path and into an unseen future. How often along the way did Abram search the skies to quiet fears and ground himself in the promise?

It is important to notice that in this text God does not admonish Abram for continuing in fear after God has commanded him not to be afraid. Rather, God comforts Abram, offering a vision that will restore hope in the longed-for, divinely promised future. Similarly, when God invites us to release **our fear**, this story offers a reminder that God **understands that we fear**; God understands that fear is very real to us. When our faith is shaky and our trust falters, we need

God’s help, not judgment. Like Abram we need to be directed beyond ourselves to the assurance of what has been promised. As believers grafted into Abram’s family tree, we rest ourselves in Jesus’ promise that it is God’s “good pleasure to give [us] the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

In the passage from Luke, after telling the disciples not to be afraid, Jesus points to what is possible when we trust God enough to let fear and worry go. Urging a letting go of possessions, Jesus signals a new way of living fearlessly. With assurance of the treasure that is ours already, Jesus invites followers to turn toward others in generosity. Selling possessions and giving alms will be hallmark of the community that, freed from fear, trusts the “unfailing treasure” that has been promised. Unlike those who fearfully clutch their “purses that wear out” (money and other material goods), Jesus contends that the freedom God offers invites us to a way of radical generosity.

In her book *Jesus Freak: Feeding, Healing, Raising the Dead* (Jossey-Bass, 2010), Sara Miles tells of visiting a private school around the corner from the church in San Francisco where she founded and directs a food pantry that offers free, fresh groceries to 400 families each Friday. Having volunteered at the pantry the week before, the fourth graders had lots of questions, many of which were about “fairness.” Keenly aware of what she calls their “acute sense of justice,” and how hard it is for all of us to wrestle with the centering words of the pantry inscribed at the base of the church’s altar: “Did not our Lord dine with publicans and harlots? Therefore make no distinction between worthy and unworthy; all must be equal in your eyes to love and to serve.” (Isaac of Nineveh, a 7th century saint), she talked about the idea of “taking advantage.” She explained that it is “impossible to be taken advantage of as long as you were giving something away without conditions. ‘If it’s a trade, then it’s fair or unfair, . . . But if I’m going to give it to you anyway, no matter what you do, then you can’t take advantage of me.’” She then relates this from the end of the classroom time: “‘I think,’ said another boy, ‘it’s cool how people can’t take advantage of you. That sort of means the pantry is invincible.’” (35–38).

Such “invincibility” is what Jesus describes in today’s gospel passage. Resting heart and treasure in an as-yet-unseen promise is what makes possible a new way of being (invincible!) in the world, one in which we can be radically generous because fearlessness begets generosity and generosity transforms us from ones concerned about what others might take from us into ones focused on what others can receive from us.

The poet Wendell Berry puts it this way (excerpted from “There is No Going Back” in *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979–1997*, Counterpoint, 1999):

Now more than ever you can be
generous toward each day
that comes, young, to disappear
forever, and yet remain

3. Dunn, Gabby. *Bad With Money: The Imperfect Art of Getting Your Financial Sh*t Together*. (New York: Atria, 2019), 11.

unaging in the mind.
Every day you have less reason
not to give yourself away.

With this in mind, the second part of Luke's gospel might be less about putting the first-century Jesus community on notice about the second coming of Christ and more about a charge to pay attention to the many ways Christ has come and is coming, again and again, throughout time and in unexpected places and people. Where and how are we now challenged to live in the great invincibility of radical generosity—giving away ourselves, our time, and our possessions? Asking ourselves these questions may present the passage in a more relatable way to today's followers of Jesus who are called to stand ready for "the unexpected hour" (Luke 12:40). How will we serve the one who repeatedly surprises us showing up where and when we least expect Christ to be?

Joanne Engquist and Kari Lipke

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost August 18, 2019

Jeremiah 23:23–29

Psalm 82

Hebrews 11:29–12:2

Luke 12:49–56

Engaging the Texts

The gospel reading for this day provides a good example of the paradigmatically Lutheran "both/and" dialectic. Behind Jesus' sharp words we sense the tension between faith in God's saving grace and the challenging discipleship that bears witness to that grace. This tension is symbolized with oppositional images, the fire of God's judgment and the waters of baptism, and it is these theological motifs that today's preacher is challenged to set before the assembly without permitting them to collapse too quickly or neatly into one or the other.

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled," Jesus begins, intentionally incendiary as he agitates the listening disciples. Perhaps this shift in tone surprises the followers of Jesus. It certainly surprises many contemporary listeners who hear it read aloud in worship and bristle at its challenge to a conception of Jesus as gentle, meek, and mild (as in Charles Wesley's similarly named hymn). Those who feel this way need not be embarrassed, nor should the preacher score easy rhetorical points by suggesting as much. Instead, this moment offers an opportunity to remind the assembly of the rich connections between the ministry of Jesus and the witness of the prophets of Israel.

As is common throughout Luke's gospel, Jesus offers words and signs reminiscent of the prophet Elijah. God sends Elijah to the widow at Zarephath, and grain and oil are multiplied to feed the hungry (1 Kings 17:8–16); Jesus feeds the five thousand (Luke 9:10–17). Elijah then raises the widow's son to new life (1 Kings 17:17–24); Jesus raises the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:11–17). Of course, all of this is foreshadowed in his inaugural sermon in Nazareth, in which Jesus also offered provocative remarks, reminding those in attendance of these very stories while making the point that God's favor will not be bound to any one people or nation (Luke 4:24–30).

Those familiar with the Elijah-Elisha cycle in 1 and 2 Kings may then be less surprised to hear Jesus calling down fire at this point in the gospel of Luke. In Elijah's epic confrontation with the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18:20–40), empty worship and false religion are consumed by fire. This is the story the prophet Jeremiah recalls in the appointed Hebrew scripture as he condemns the false prophets who trade their dreams for God's word. "They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal" (Jer 23:29).

Pastoral Reflections

God's fiery judgment, first glimpsed in Hebrew scriptures and then remembered in the prophetic ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, is not the cause of human division so much as the response to it. While the primary focus of the texts today is the contrast between divine and human judgment, it is in the appointed psalm that we hear God's hopes and expectations for humanity laid bare. "How long will you judge unjustly," God asks, "and show partiality to the wicked? (Selah) Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (Ps 82:2–4).

God's question, posed through the psalmist ("How long will you judge unjustly?"), is an indictment of humanity's narrow self-concern. While we might wish to focus on the theme of God's judgment in these texts, it is our own judgment that is found lacking. As a species we tend toward self-centeredness. We define ourselves by our family's background and origins, by our corporate and consumer affiliations, by our political and national allegiances. By contrast, in Jesus and through our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection, God aligns God's own self with the suffering of all of humanity and all of creation.

The challenge of preaching these texts is to insist upon the incisive edge of God's word, a word that demands radical obedience and costly discipleship, while retaining some humility about our ability to discern God's movement and purposes in the present moment. Preachers should not be too hesitant in proclaiming God's preferential option for the poor, nor in making some judgments about the present moment in

which we find ourselves. Jesus goads us on, “You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” (Luke 12:56). Still, this is not the moment to claim divine warrant for human tactics.

In this regard, the reading from Hebrews is useful. There we are reminded that in every generation God’s people have faced challenges like those before us now. In its recitation of faithful responses to life’s crises, we hear that some conquered kingdoms while others escaped the edge of the sword; some administered justice while others were tortured, chained, and imprisoned; some obtained promises while others suffered mocking and flogging (Heb 11:32–38). All of these are commended as acts of faith. In other words, there is no single right way to live faithfully in response to God’s grace. Discipleship requires us to exercise judgment and discernment, to know the stories of those who’ve gone before us and then to interpret the present time in light of God’s justice, mercy, and love.

Erik Christensen

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost August 25, 2019

Isaiah 58:9b–14

Psalms 103:1–8

Hebrews 12:18–29

Luke 13:10–17

Engaging the Texts

This week’s preparation offers a good opportunity to do a slower-than-usual read, line by line, phrase by phrase, through these well-loved texts. This is true particularly in **Isaiah**. We find two notable sets of If/Then: “If you remove the yoke...then your light shall rise...” And, “If you refrain from trampling the sabbath...then you shall take delight in the Lord...” Take the time to diagram the ways the yoke divides us and in turn our responses. Similarly, consider the role of Sabbath and the delight we find in God. This close read is at once geeky and enlightening. This section of **Psalms 103** begins, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and let all that is within me, bless [the] holy name.” It continues with a lovely litany of the Holy One’s myriad actions: forgiving, healing, redeeming, crowning, satisfying, renewing. The **Hebrews** text may be less familiar. The whole lection contrasts the covenant we find with Moses at Mt. Sinai with the new Jerusalem, the city of God. Be sensitive about the potential anti-Semitic undertones in this contrast. This sense of the kingdom that cannot be shaken could be a direction to pursue. The shakings refer to judgments and harken back to Haggai 2:6. The line about

the blood of Abel (v. 24) reminds us of the classically human themes of brother killing brothers, the struggle of the ego, jealousy, and our own capacity for violence. The festive images of the city of God are rich with an almost Revelation quality. **Luke’s** gospel story of the bent over woman is so well-known. This is the third time that concerns are stirred about how the Sabbath is being observed. While some would see the prohibition of work on the Sabbath as clearly delineated, even Deuteronomy (22:1–4) holds the tension that while work is prohibited on the Sabbath, liberation (of a neighbor’s ox or donkey) is simultaneously part of the call. The themes of liberation weave through these passages, particularly Isaiah and Luke, but through the others, too. Sabbath is another theme. A line in Psalm 103 captures the overarching vision: “The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.”

Pastoral Reflections

In today’s readings—I’m thinking particularly of Isaiah and Luke—God shows up as a liberator, and we are called to grapple with our role in this liberation. **When are we like the bent woman, in need of liberation and life?** We are told that for eighteen years she carried this spirit. We can muse about what this meant contextually, the economics, the social scene, and we can ponder the possibility of this woman’s self-imposed and community-imposed isolation. What is it like, literally or figuratively, to finally be able to stand up fully? How is our visual world changed? Instead of being bent and looking downward, what now can be seen directly? How does this feel? How does it change the power dynamic? The text says she immediately begins praising God. Some in disabilities communities ask us to consider the flip side of healing, how this messes with one’s sense of identity, how it assumes we haven’t already been whole. It’s important to venture into this with sensitivity and awareness. **I’m also curious when we’re the legalistic, indignant ones**, feeling ornery that the healing didn’t happen within our tightly defined and controlled bounds. This parallels the Isaiah reading—I wonder when we add to the burdensome yoke another carries. What do we do that adds to this burden? Isaiah offers some examples and we could riff on these and plenty more. Then I’m interested in that sense of **shame** that the opponents are said to feel. Are they really feeling shame? Or is this Luke’s hand? Spending time with that sense of shame may multiply the liberative possibilities of today’s reading. **Rejoicing** is also in the gospel, and that, too, holds liberation. What does rejoicing look like when we’ve been liberated? When we witness liberation? What does it look like when we’re the ones who still await liberation and wonder if it will ever come? What does it look like when we’re part of making the liberation happen?

This brings me to the bigger questions about our role in liberation. **How do we cooperate with God and God’s**

work of liberation? And, when have we, consciously or not, blocked liberation? How are we part of liberating individuals, but even more, systems? This sense of systemic liberation is vital and too easily overlooked. Racial equity, climate science, immigration, the list of systems in need of liberation is enormous, and within each system are individual stories. What are some stories we can share about liberation? How can we tap into our own experience of bondage and the liberating power of God, and God's people? Tell these stories, too, for God's liberating power isn't just for someone else, it's for each one of us, and for our communities. There's a grace in these passages today. The springs of water that never fail remind me of God's continual, persistent, liberating presence. Over the history of Christianity, liberation often has not been at the heart of the gospel that was preached—quite the contrary. In this sense, we are called to liberate Christianity from our own past, and to liberate ourselves from identities, patterns, and theologies that are not life-giving.

Jen Nagel

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost September 1, 2019

Proverbs 25:6–7 (or Sirach 10:12–18)

Psalm 112

Hebrew 13:1–8, 15–16

Luke 14:1, 7–14

Engaging the Texts

In the texts assigned for this week, we hear a lot about honor and righteousness. My thinking breaks them into two sets of two readings: Proverbs and the Gospel deal with orders of precedence and honor at official functions; Psalm 112 and Hebrews deal with the qualities of the honorable and the righteous. Proverbs and Luke name the way honor is doled out at official functions in the world of the writer and advises the listener against subscribing to such a way of understanding honor and righteousness. The writer in Proverbs is most adamant that the listeners not brag about themselves or assert their righteousness as might be expected in society, but instead allow their lowliness to be noticed and lifted up. In Luke, Jesus imagines a theoretical feast where people are choosing where they sit. Perhaps taking a cue from Proverbs, Jesus argues that one should not assert their honor and righteousness by taking the best seat, but instead take the lowest seat so they may be lifted up. Further, the Gospel writer encourages the listeners to not only reverse these codes of honor in their individual lives, but to begin to build a world where honor is given to “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the

blind.” The reversals that Proverbs and Luke speak of recall the great reversals common in the Gospel of Luke (and perhaps best known in the Magnificat) where the intrinsic honor and righteousness of the least among us are highlighted. After this move in the Gospel from caution to the reversal of codes of honor and righteousness, Psalm 112 and the Epistle reading from Hebrews help us to further imagine the qualities needed for such a world. The psalmist highlights the way that fear of the Lord and delight in the commandments of the Lord affect one's choices, writing that the honorable and the righteous know God's blessings and are gracious and merciful. Further, they are known by their generosity and attention to the poor. The author of the letter to the Hebrews grounds honor and righteousness in mutual love, suggesting that through mutual love all will be honored. The author lifts up several particular ways that mutual love is shown: remembering those who are in hard times, honoring one's own relationships, and keeping a healthy relationship with money. Our hope—rather than in our own security or worldly honor and righteousness—comes from the promise of God who vows to “never leave [us] or forsake [us].” It is this promise that allows us to confidently reject the honor and righteousness that the world offers, instead bestowing honor and righteousness on the least among us.

Pastoral Reflections

Anytime I preach and come across a text that skips over a large section of verses, I wonder why. What is being left out by those who picked the readings for this day? Today's reading from Luke does just that—making a huge jump from verse 1 to verse 7. When I went back to look at what was cut, I discovered that the verses cut tell the story of Jesus' interaction with a man who has dropsy. In the story, Jesus challenges the Pharisees watching him as to whether it is lawful to cure on the Sabbath, asking if they would rescue an ox or a child who has fallen into a well on the Sabbath. When they cannot respond, Jesus heals the man with dropsy. The thing that strikes me about this omission is the context the omitted verses supply. First, by understanding that on their way to a banquet Jesus and the people with him encounter a sick person, the contrast between the opulence of a banquet and the need of most people is highlighted. Further, the cut story provides a real-life example of the way worldly visions of honor and righteousness can have disastrous effects on the lives of so many people. When Jesus arrives at the banquet, he must be thinking about the man with dropsy who would never receive an invitation to a party like this. Jesus' response then, in chastising those fighting over their position and encouraging them to invite “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” to their banquets, is clearly influenced by his interaction with this man. But, in our experience of this text, that man's story is erased and therefore, the context of Jesus' thinking.

In our modern worldview, we like to believe that we do not live in an honor/shame culture. But I see honor and visions of self-righteousness still playing a large role in who we choose to interact with, how we behave, and who we see as problematic. So often, in talking about honor and good behavior, we continue to erase the stories of people adversely affected by our continued allegiance to worldly honor and righteousness. Jesus provides a different way for us: a way that frees us from our bonds to worldly honor and righteousness allowing us to imagine a world where mutual love and generosity are our response to the righteousness, honor, and dignity all people receive from God. As you prepare to preach this week, I encourage you to imagine who is excluded from your community because of honor codes or ideas about righteousness. Whose stories are we not hearing to which Jesus calls us to listen?

Peter Carlson Schattauer

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 8, 2019

Deuteronomy 30:15–20

Psalm 1

Philemon 1–21

Luke 14:25–33

If you find yourself struggling with these texts, you are in good company. Scholars, theologians, politicians, and philosophers have tried to make sense of these readings and no definitive reading has prevailed. These readings yearn for new, fresh, bold—and queer—interpretations.

The reading from Deuteronomy exhorts the audience to live according to God’s ways or face certain demise. This feels like a desperate suitor saying, “Love me or else!” Is this a healthy relationship with God? I hope not. Consider that the book of Deuteronomy was likely compiled to usher in the reforms of King Josiah (d. 609 BCE). In this case the text is not about Moses, the Israelites, or the Promised Land, but instead it uses this ancient narrative to persuade people to reflect on their current ways of doing things. Josiah wanted to consolidate power in Jerusalem by restoring the temple and getting rid of shrines he deemed non-Jewish. In more recent times this text has been used to rally anti-abortion activists, homophobic protests, and nationalistic fervor. How do we retell our history to suit our current objectives?

Psalm One brings plenty of judgmental hatred for unnamed “wicked” people. Is this a healthy way to approach others? When I read the psalm I imagine someone who lives near a Pride parade route yet has not come to embrace their LGBTQ neighbors. They close their windows as the parade rolls by, self-assured that their seclusion helps them remain

“untainted” by the “wicked” frenzy. But does self-righteousness bring happiness? Maybe the self-imposed sequestering is the way of the wicked (after all the “wicked” in the text are lingering and sitting.) The happy folks are the ones who are thriving, living, and prospering. How can we be part of the celebration?

Paul’s letter to Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus on behalf of their slave Onesimus is overflowing with Paul’s signature passive/aggressive pleading. Is this a useful way to encourage liberation and justice? Paul’s letter can be (and has been) read to endorse slavery. Feminist scholars such as Sarah Winter and Sabine Bieberstein have provided critical perspective for understanding the ways this letter disrupts the “normalcy of slavery.” Paul asks the owners to accept Philemon, not as a slave, but as a brother. In the fledgling Christian community people from all walks of life tried to find common ground. Equality is a radical idea that isn’t very appealing to those in authority. How does it change our culture when we see others as equals? Paul writes with the persuasive finesse of a grandmother who needs you to do some chores. He’s self-deprecating and self-congratulatory; he’s in control and at the mercy of others; his words are measured and urgent. It seems clear that Paul’s letter is intended to reunite him with Onesimus soon, but with a new dynamic. I love that Paul calls Onesimus his “own heart.” What kind of relationship does that evoke for you?

The author of Luke relays a very troubling teaching of Jesus that we should hate our families and give up all our possessions in order to follow Christ. Is this really the kind of teaching we can promote? Recall that Jesus is being followed by a “large crowd.” If Jesus understands that those in power feel threatened by him, then all of these people are in imminent danger, too. They are his army if he wants them to be, but more likely they will be hurt. Could this text be read as a subtle way that Jesus can disband this large crowd and protect them from the coming backlash? By raising the bar of discipleship from “come I will make you fish for people” (Luke 5) to “you must hate your family,” Jesus loses me. I would have turned around. I don’t want to get crucified; I’m here for the love and healing! I wonder how many in that crowd decided to go home? A few verses later we hear that “Now the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him” (Luke 15:1). It sounds like the large crowd went away after Jesus’ new requirements, but those who were already ostracized from their families or weighed down by their possessions were the ones who are left. Could that be intentional? Since many LGBTQ people had been ostracized from their families of origin, many people have created families we choose. When our safety nets are removed we must confront our realities. What can we learn about discovering our real values in community? What can we learn about mob mentality from these pages?

These texts can help us have healthy conversations about community ethics. What does God call us to do as a com-

munity? Whom do we include/exclude? How do we treat each other? How do we organize for justice? Hopefully those conversations lead to expansive ideas of who exactly belongs to our community and how we love them. LGBTQ people are your neighbors, they are in your pews, you love them and care for them, and want them to have fulfilling and meaningful lives. Decisions made in community can be arduous, but when we follow God's way and proceed thoughtfully with concern for our neighbors' well-being, we will be blessed.

Caleb Crainer

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost September 15, 2019

Exodus 32:7–14

Psalms 51:1–10

1 Timothy 1:12–17

Luke 15:1–10

Engaging the Texts

The common theme among these four texts is the reality of human sin and God's mercy. Each text follows the same movement from sin, to repentance in some form, to God's grace and forgiveness.

Luke's gospel is especially attuned to the company Jesus keeps. Luke 15:1–10 is one of four places in this gospel where Jesus welcomes and eats with tax collectors and sinners (5:27–32; 7:34, 36–50, and 19:1–10). Tax collectors were the ultimate middlemen, exploited by their Roman bosses and hated by their peers from whom they collected taxes. Sinners, though given a more vague title, were presumably also without power or respect in society.

The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin are a direct response to the Pharisees' grumbling about Jesus welcoming sinners and tax collectors. This grumbling—in Greek, the onomatopoeic *diagogguzo*, the indignant murmuring of a crowd—shows up in three of the four stories mentioned above. This is neither the first nor the last time Jesus explains his friendships with those who have been left out of society. Jesus saw no use for social or religious rules that kept people separate from one another or from the love of God. Luke's gospel inverts the hierarchy of top-down power often and affirms that neither sin or social position can separate a person from God's love.

Jesus' two parables upend expected power structures by putting the excluded as the one whom God seeks, first as a lost sheep found by God the shepherd, then as a lost coin found by God the woman. God's tenacity and mercy are poignant in these parables, and in all four texts for this Sunday. Luke gives us an image of God as a tender shepherd and a determined

woman, relentless in their care to find the lost, rejoicing when they have found the excluded one.

Jesus makes the comparison of righteous elite vs. repentant sinner even more obvious a few chapters later in the parable about the tax collector and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9–14), in which a Pharisee who prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people...including this tax collector," is contrasted with the tax collector who calls himself a sinner and asks for God's mercy. The sinner "went down to his home justified rather than the other." In all three parables, Jesus exposes those who cling to rules, comfort, and power; he justifies those whom society has lost, those who recognize their salvation is not found in power and self-preservation, but in the acknowledgement of their own broken and complicated humanity.

Pastoral Reflections

I was recently talking to a friend who said, "I don't go to church because I don't think the things Christians name as sins are actually sins." She has a point. When we preach vaguely about sin and mercy, our words are at risk of being interpreted through the damaging ways the church has talked about sin: shame-based, private morality-focused, behavior regulating, and anti-LGBTQIA+. The treatment of sin in these four texts has the potential to be spoken about in either damaging or life-giving ways.

Speaking in terms of social and structural sin—not just personal sins comprised of individual actions—is a helpful way to frame these readings. God searches for and finds the repentant sinner in the midst of those who do not think they need to repent. In her book *One Coin Found*, Emmy Kegler (also featured in this edition of *Preaching Helps*) frames the lost sheep and the lost coin as those who have been neglected by social and religious structures—those wounded by the structural sins of homophobia, sexism, racism, and other systems. "We try to find something that will feed us, somewhere safe to rest, someone to protect us from a world that wants to devour us," she writes.⁴

Framed this way, it is not just our personal sins for which we need to repent, but also the ways we participate in systems that exclude and harm others. We all find ourselves in different places in different systems: sometimes as the excluded one in need of being found by God, sometimes as the one who participates in and perpetuates a system that excludes and devalues others.

A word of caution about Psalm 51:5. To those who have been conditioned to see themselves as bad, wrong, or less than whole (which may be anyone, but especially those whom these broken systems have devalued), these words must be

4. Emmy Kegler. *One Coin Found*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 4.

put in context. Our theological tradition is built on the arc of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. The readings for this Sunday speak directly to fall (sin) and redemption (God's grace). When reading Psalm 51, a reminder of the first part of our Christian story may be in order: we were created good. In their book *Made for Goodness and Why This Makes All the Difference*, Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho write, "You and I, too, are fundamentally good. We are tuned to the key of goodness. This is not to deny evil; it is to face evil squarely. And we can face evil squarely because we know that evil will not have the last word."⁵ God's affirmation of all creation as good is an appropriate reminder to those who have been conditioned to hear these texts as punitive.

Miriam Samuelson-Roberts

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 22, 2019

Amos 8:4–7

Psalm 113

1 Timothy 2:1–7

Luke 16:1–13

Engaging the Texts

Money, power, and justice are threads that run through the texts assigned for this Sunday, and the Gospel lesson is one of Jesus' most difficult parables—so, God be with you this week, dear preacher.

The short passage from Amos is addressed to those who "trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land." More specifically, Amos' harsh words here are directed to grain traders who piously observe days of rest by refraining from business, but then immediately return to preying on their less fortunate neighbors. The NRSV translation of verse 5b ("We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances...") is rather opaque. Consider the NIV for a more accessible rendering, where the traders are pictured "skimping on the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales." The wrongdoing here is more profound than mere dishonesty and deception in carrying out their business. What condemns these grain traders is a lust for wealth that surpasses concern for the well-being of their neighbors.

Such lust for wealth is also exposed and condemned in the Gospel reading. The rich man's business enterprise—like all such corporate ventures—revolves around the bottom line.

The rich man cares exclusively about his wealth, and when he sees that the manager is "squandering his property," he is incensed and threatens to terminate the man's job. In a sermon on this passage at the May 2019 Festival of Homiletics, Brian McLaren suggested that at this point the manager realizes he means nothing to the rich man. He is merely a pawn, used by the rich man to increase his own wealth. Further, he realizes that the rich man's debtors feel exactly the same way. The manager has an epiphany: the lust for wealth causes us to devalue one another and makes us believe others are only useful for money. The manager decides he will participate in this system no more. He calls the debtors in and, one by one, reduces their bills. McLaren concludes that Jesus commends the manager not because he acts dishonestly—an odd message indeed—but because he realizes that people matter and that a lust for wealth causes us to degrade our neighbors. He refuses to go along with a system that values money over people.

Taken at face value, the second reading for today—part of a weeks-long series from 1 Timothy directed by the lectionary—seems out of place alongside the assigned texts from Amos and Luke. Urging that "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life," the author (purportedly Paul, but likely not) emphasizes decorum and decency. He calls for accommodation to the Roman imperial ruling authorities for the sake of peace. Decorum, decency, and accommodation seem incompatible with Amos' prophetic judgment and Jesus praising the dishonest manager. So what are we to do with this text? One approach would be to acknowledge that while it's easy for us to see what is problematic about 1 Timothy's message of decorum, decency, and accommodation in a world where deference to the status quo turns a deaf ear to the cries of the poor, we are likely ourselves tempted to go the route of decorum, decency, and accommodation in order to avoid rocking the boat. How could we possibly challenge the lust for money that causes us to devalue our neighbors without rocking the boat?

Pastoral Reflections

Today's readings from Amos and Luke could be read as a sharp critique of modern American capitalism—an economic system that invites human exploitation by valuing money before people. This critique transcends the standard debates between liberals and conservatives, as virtually the entire American political establishment is deeply invested in preserving free-market capitalism. Might today's readings open up an opportunity in our preaching to bypass the usual disagreements between the political left and right and to offer a more fundamental critique of our society's corruptive deference to money, which infects liberals and conservatives alike?

For some time now, I've been wrestling with how to preach

5. Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu. *Made for Goodness and Why This Makes All the Difference*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 10.

about social justice without simply spewing well-worn, one-sided political talking points peppered with some scripture and theology. Is it possible to talk about economic justice without being tagged as an adherent of a particular political party, whereby listeners reflexively and uncritically determine whether they agree with our message? How do we preach social justice without coming across as partisan hacks, immediately endearing ourselves to those on one side of the political spectrum and alienating those with different views? Perhaps we can take a route found within today's readings, offering a penetrating critique of our society's worship of wealth, challenging everyone—regardless of their political persuasion—to examine their relationship to money, and asking our hearers to consider the economic implications of loving our neighbor.

Javen Swanson

Saint Michael and All Angels September 29, 2019

Daniel 10:10–14; 12:1–3

Psalms 103:1–5, 20–22

Revelation 12:7–12

Luke 10:17–20

Engaging the Texts

I remember sitting in the pew as a child listening to the communion preface and waiting for the words, "...with the angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim we praise your name and join in their unending hymn." I loved getting to these words because it meant the talking was almost done and the time was approaching to go up to the railing for the meal. Later, in junior high, I found myself pondering these peculiar words. What exactly did it mean to join my voice with the hosts of heaven? Or these "beings" called archangels, cherubim, and seraphim? Then, at some point, I relegated these words to beautiful sentiment—much like singing "Silent Night" on Christmas Eve, a night that probably wasn't so quiet, but professed beauty and wonder. Didn't these words simply mean that all of creation and its creatures joined voices in praise to God? Yet, as we celebrate Saint Michael and All Angels Sunday, we are invited to delve more deeply into what it means to raise our voices with the archangels, cherubim, and seraphim, not relegate them to a beautiful sentiment.

In the Hebrew Scriptures there are a number of references to these divine beings—from the cherubim in Genesis guarding the gates to Eden, to the seraphim in Isaiah who continually sing God's praises, to the *mal'akh* or holy messengers who bear the messages and carry out tasks of the Most High. These divine beings weave between the realm of heaven and the world we

know; they are most often not visible; they reflect splendor yet easily evoke fear; they are created by God and carry out God's will.

In this week's Scripture texts we hear of Michael, one of two angels named in Scripture (the other being Gabriel), and Michael's presence protecting Daniel and the people of Israel in the first reading; and of Michael and the angels waging war and prevailing against Satan (the Adversary) in the book of Revelation.

While most of what we hear in contemporary culture about "guardian angels" is made up by popular myth and used to sell figurines and charm bracelets, the texts for this day do, indeed, point to divine messengers who protect God's chosen and beloved people against the forces that would harm or destroy. God's *mal'akhim* (Hebrew), *angeloi* (Greek), messengers (English) are witnesses to God's presence and persistent promise for each of us and our communities. It is this proclamation that can move us beyond sentiment. These angels point to God's abiding with us amid the changes and challenges of life across the ages.

Pastoral Reflections

In 2008 I was called to serve a congregation in Minneapolis. I would venture that 95 percent of the congregation was excited by the prospect of having an openly gay pastor—or just fine with it and didn't view it as much of a big deal. There was one older member of the congregation, however, who lived in a Senior Housing complex who let others know that she was not so thrilled. For the first five months of my ministry I would call and try to set up a time to meet. Generally, she was too busy; other times we would set an appointment and she would call two or three days before our meeting to cancel. Finally, while visiting another member in the same complex, I knocked on her door; she answered and, not knowing what to do, she invited me in.

Breaking our mutual discomfort, I noticed a Bible and a stack of notecards on her sofa. It turned out she was reading through Scripture to find every place the word *angel* showed up. Together we talked through stories in Genesis and the prophets; we lifted up places angels are mentioned in the psalms; there was Gabriel in Luke, and the angels in Revelation—the list went on. As we moved through these stories together I felt a Holy Presence among us. I was no longer scared of this parishioner others had described as a "crotchety old woman;" and it seemed that she grew more comfortable with this young gay pastor she had not been so thrilled about. The "angels" seemed to melt our mutual fear and move us beyond stereotypes into relationship and community.

A couple years later I arrived at her apartment with my five-month-old son. I got a smile (I'm not sure how much was for me and how much was for my son, who "just happened" to

be wearing a polo shirt in the colors of the Swedish flag). Again, there was a divine presence and the sharing of communion. It makes me wonder how angels are at work in our lives and our world as the Adversary of fear, division, and pain is confronted by the wonder and glory of God. Is this not the proclamation of John on Patmos as he counters the experiences of the Roman Empire and all who would tear down or wage war against the proclamation of the love and grace made known in Jesus?

Today I serve St. Michael's Lutheran Church—a congregation named after a messenger and archangel of God. Amid the divisions I see in our country, the diagnoses people have received, and the pain and grief people know so well, I strive to pause, look, and listen carefully where divine messengers are showing themselves. On occasion there are glimpses of these holy beings watching over, protecting, challenging, and bearing a word of life. These are the images that compel me on Sunday morning to raise my voice “with angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim” in wonder and praise.

Brad Froslee



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