

Preaching Helps

Second Sunday of Easter — Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

It's April and Easter is Already Over

It seems much too early for Easter to be over—all of April stretching ahead of us with Easter already a week old. The relatives, if they came for dinner, have all gone home, and the last egg has been found under the sofa cushion in the living room. So here we are: waiting. But not quite sure what we're waiting for. Perhaps for spring to break through the hard ground, for the planting season to begin, for school to be over. Or to see if Easter made any difference to us or to anybody else. We've hung the good suit back in the closet and set the wilted lily out on the back steps. We've closed the door and now, we wait.

It wasn't so different in Jerusalem. Friday and Saturday had passed and Sunday had come. But with the dawn, came unexpected—indeed, unbelievable—news that Jesus had risen from the dead. (It was the same word the preacher brought us a week ago when the church was filled, as we sat listening in our good suits.) The disciples who gathered in the room had heard the news, but hadn't seen anything to confirm it. So they closed the door and locked it. Some, no doubt, wondered if it wasn't time to go home, to get back to whatever they had been doing before all of this happened. But for now, they waited, not quite sure what they were waiting for.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." I have a sense that Jesus was looking over Thomas' shoulder when he said those words—looking at those of us who stand this side of Easter evening. Pastors may be worried about losing momentum with Easter Sunday in the rearview mirror so early in the church calendar. Will there be a drop in attendance, not only on the Sunday after Easter, but also on the Sundays stretching into summer? A pastor friend told me that some parishioners said they take the summer off from worship as though that is a normal part of vacation. At least we can be grateful that Pentecost comes in mid-May and doesn't fall on Memorial Day weekend!

This issue of "Preaching Helps" takes us from the Second Sunday of Easter through Pentecost and into the long green season of Ordinary Time. Of course the calendar in the United States will be marking the countdown to Election Day on November 8. Over the next seven months we will hear the biblical texts with political debates and campaign ads in our ears. What are the marks of the communities that believed in Jesus after he was no longer with them? What kinds of power do we see and

hear in the scripture texts and in the campaign ads? Where do we hear dissonance as we read the biblical texts with the TV on? Even though the texts are repeated in a three-year cycle, the same texts never sound the same when they come 'round again. What will we hear in this year that we've never heard before?

I am grateful to several writers who are new to "Preaching Helps" but not new to parish ministry.

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Judith Mattison, an ELCA pastor, is now retired after serving several large congregations and writing books for Augsburg Fortress. She is an active member at Calvary Lutheran in south Minneapolis, occasionally doing supply preaching. She enjoys working with children in an inner-city school, a pre-school for low-income families, and loving her two young granddaughters!

Jen Nagel serves as lead pastor at University Lutheran Church of Hope in Minneapolis. For a dozen years prior, she served in a redevelopment congregation, Salem English Lutheran Church that eventually became part of a Spirit-led ecumenical partnership called Spring House Ministry Center.

Mary Halvorson and her husband, **Dan Garnaas**, are co-pastors at Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, a church surrounded by the University of Minnesota and the University of Minnesota Hospital. When she is not wrestling with sermons, Mary delights in being a grandmother, reading, running, and collecting stories and ideas.

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Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, "Preaching Helps"

Second Sunday of Easter

April 3, 2016

Acts 5:27–32

Psalm 118:14–29

Revelation 1:4–8

John 20:19–31

Engaging the Texts

What happened to the Old Testament reading? Perhaps nobody is wondering, but hopefully some noticed. Throughout the Easter season, the First Reading is always from Acts and recounts stories of the early church (before it was even called the church). But this doesn't mean the Old Testament has been replaced by the New—like a “new and improved” product line. A sentence or two about why we're reading Acts is important, especially since the Acts and John texts contain anti-Jewish language.

Acts 5 needs a brief introduction to identify the “they” in the text. They are the apostles. It seems that all of them had been arrested and thrown in prison, though only Peter is named. But an angel opened the prison doors and set them free. In today's reading the apostles are brought before the council and questioned by the high priest. The answer given by Peter and the others is troubling: “The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree” (v. 30). Such charges against the Jewish leaders are common in Acts. With the disappearance of the Old Testament reading (except for the Psalm) and charges made by the apostles, it's important to remind people that Christians have not replaced Jews as God's chosen people.

Revelation is the Second Reading throughout the Easter season. Preachers may choose to preach a series of six sermons on this puzzling book of the Bible. Today's reading sets the stage: “John to the seven churches that are in Asia...” The preacher needs to fill in details that aren't part of this salutation: What are the seven churches? Who is John and why is he writing this letter? It's not about the rapture! (See Barbara Rossing's helpful book *The Rapture Exposed*.)

John 20 shares the problem noted earlier in Acts 5: the doors of the house were locked “for fear of the Jews.” Everybody inside that locked room was Jewish! As time passed after Jesus' resurrection, the conflict between Jews who believed in Jesus and those who didn't leaked back into John's gospel causing “the Jews” as a group to be blamed for Jesus' death. The One who entered that locked room saying, “Peace be with you” was Jewish. Surely that peace needs to be extended to those who remain outside the doors we have locked.

But Thomas wasn't inside that locked room. Did this

mean he wasn't afraid of the authorities? Or was John trying to diminish the role of Thomas? (Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*.) Not only was Thomas absent—he didn't receive the gift of the Spirit when Jesus breathed on the other disciples. But John's picture of Thomas isn't completely negative. In the Lazarus story it is Thomas who urged his fellow disciples to be willing to die with Jesus (11:16). It is Thomas who asked an urgent question at the last supper: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus answered Thomas without chastising him as he did Philip a few verses later (14:5–6, 8–9).

When Thomas learns that Jesus appeared to the others, he doesn't rejoice. “I won't believe,” he says, “unless I see the mark of the nails and put my finger in the mark of the nails...” A week later, Jesus invites Thomas to do exactly that. Three times in nine verses the wounds of Jesus are emphasized. This is more than a matter of verification. Earlier in this chapter Mary knew Jesus by hearing the sound of her name, nothing about wounds. John's gospel began with a glorious prologue: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Now this Word-made-flesh returns to God, risen and wounded forever.

Pastoral Reflections

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Jesus' promise may be the reason we need to hear this text every year on the Sunday after Easter. That promise and the wounds are for our sake. If we don't see the wounds, we won't see Jesus. People who are deaf sign the name Jesus by quickly touching the palm of each hand: Jesus, the one with wounded hands.

The wounds have particular meaning for some people. Nancy Eiseland was one of those people. She was born with a bone defect that meant she often could not walk at all. Sadly, Nancy died from cancer a few years ago, but she left personal and theological insights in her book *The Disabled God*. “Who is the one we remember in the Eucharist?” she asks. “It is the disabled God who is present at the table—God who was physically tortured, arose from the dead, and is present in heaven and on earth, disabled and whole... Christ's resurrection offers hope that our nonconventional, and sometimes difficult bodies, participate fully in the *imago Dei*... God is changed by the experience of being a disabled body” (107).

Her insights are important for those of us who do not live with a disability. No one is unscarred by living. We, too, are wounded and Jesus touches the wounded places of our lives. We don't have to be all fixed up. The risen, wounded Christ comes to each of us saying, “Peace be with you.”

Barbara Lundblad

Third Sunday of Easter

April 10, 2016

Acts 9:1–6 [7–20]

Psalm 30

Revelation 5:11–14

John 21:1–19

Engaging the Texts and Pastoral Reflections

I have never been much of a fisherman. It's always been attractive to me from a distance, but something that I've never made a commitment to. Still, even for this perpetually novice fisherman, I've had some exhilarating outings. One early morning a parishioner took me out on his small boat into the Gulf of Mexico a half mile or so from the St. Petersburg Beach. The boats were so thick that you could practically step from boat to boat to boat. It was Spanish mackerel season. We happily got stuck in the middle of a school and as quickly as we could bait our hooks and get them in the water, we'd have a bite and begin the adrenaline-filled rush of reeling those beautiful, fighting fish into the boat. It all made for an enjoyable, memorable, and recreational Friday morning.

In this story, the disciples have returned to their old lives, a return that came with astonishing speed. This is no recreational fishing trip, the disciples blowing off a little steam and trying to get their minds off the turbulent events of the past weeks. In the ancient world, there probably was no such thing as recreational fishing. Too much was at stake. These men have returned to their pre-knowing-Jesus vocations.

No sooner have they returned to their previous vocations than Jesus shows up again, revealing himself once again to those same disciples. This is revelation; twice we come across *ephanerow*, in verse 1 in the active voice. This word will recur in the passive voice in verse 14, technically not a part of this lection, but certainly part of the same narrative.

In this story Jesus doesn't meet them in a closed room on a Sunday evening as he did in the previous chapter. He doesn't come to the synagogue and the revelation doesn't happen during worship. The disciples are out in their boats, not at a prayer meeting. Jesus comes in their daily routine, after they've returned to work. This three-year leave of absence from their fishing business has come to an odd and abrupt conclusion, but Jesus has not left them for good.

Don't bother making that sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular. The distinction in the biblical economy doesn't exist. In Christ, all things are made new. The life of faith is not segregated to Sunday morning's sixty minutes—even if that sixty-minute frame is extended to a small group meeting or daily personal Bible study and prayer. Christ meets us where

we are, in the places where we live. Christ dares to accompany us to the office, to the coffee shop, to the golf course, to the PTA meeting, and to the shopping mall.

The lesson from Acts gives another glimpse of the risen Christ making a meeting on the pathways of daily life. In distinction to daddy-to-be Zechariah who received a startling revelation while at work in the Temple, Saul is on the road, wreaking his havoc in the places to which The Way had spread. While on his way back to Jerusalem to give a self-congratulatory report of his zealotry, the persecuting Saul has an encounter with the persecuted One. There, in that revelation, his life is turned around forever.

The incarnation, and now even the resurrection, are social, physical events. God dares to come down to that crown of creation created in God's image. God reveals Godself in the incarnate, crucified, and risen Son; that Son continues to reveal God in physical, palpable, earthy, and accessible ways, through words, stories, fellowship, water, and meal.

This Sunday is also a good reminder and corrective to the way the resurrection is all too often an event whose sole good is for the Christian as an individual. "Because Christ rose, I, too, will rise again." No doubt that's true, but the benefit of resurrection is not primarily individual and personal.

Here, yet another post-resurrection appearance is communal. When the disciples are all together, Jesus reveals himself. With the exception of the encounter with Mary in the garden on Easter morning, every resurrection appearance is communal. Jesus appeared after the resurrection to the disciples not one by one, but when they were together.

The lesson from The Revelation to John reinforces that truth as if on steroids. We are taken to the throne room of heaven. In that setting of extraordinary lavishness and majesty sits the Lamb who has been slaughtered, but now lives and reigns. In the presence of the crucified and risen One, the angels sing their praises, joined by the saints of every time and place. "Worthy is the Lamb," they sing—that phrase which thankfully has found its way into our liturgy and is repeated over and over and over in the church's hymnody (e.g., "At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing"). All heaven and all earth join in singing praise to the One who has brought salvation and redemption to all creation. That praise, that life, that celebration is communal. And our communal, weekly meal is a foretaste of the community into which we have been received, of which we now partake by faith and not by sight.

Jim Honig

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 17, 2016

Acts 9:36–43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9–17

John 10:22–30

Engaging the Texts and Pastoral Reflections

The bucolic images that populate our minds and our churches on the Fourth Sunday of Easter are betrayed by the realities of this Sunday's gospel lesson. Remind yourself of the larger context, not only of the particular verses that form this Sunday's reading, but also the entire 10th chapter of John. Chapter 9 brings us the story of the healing of the man born blind. That narrative ends with Jesus' pointed accusation to the religious leaders whose self-diagnosis has relieved them of the danger that they might be blind. By virtue of that very diagnosis, Jesus claims they are not only blind, but "guilty."

Jesus immediately paints the contrast between the thief and robber on the one hand, and the Good Shepherd on the other. His sharp image is not ambiguous nor is the object of the accusation unclear. He continues the judgment directed at those leaders who refuse to believe in him. The tension is ramped up another notch in the only two verses in the Good Shepherd narrative that never get read from the ambo, "There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, 'He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?' Others said, 'These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'" (vv. 19–21)

While Jesus is walking around the spacious Portico of Solomon, a location that would have been bustling with pilgrims on this observance of Hanukkah, the very same religious leaders find him and surround him (*ekyklosan*). This is not a group of giddy fans closing in on Jesus hoping for an autograph. No, picture agitated and angry men who are used to having their way, pointing their fingers, thumping Jesus' chest, demanding that he quit beating around the bush and tell them clearly the conclusion that they have already come to—that he is claiming to be the Messiah, something no human being can righteously claim.

In verse 31—the final eleven verses in this chapter are also never part of the Sunday readings—the religious leaders are so incensed that they are ready to stone Jesus. In verse 39, they're ready to arrest him and again he escapes.

So, the words from Jesus' mouth that stand at the heart of this Sunday's lection are both troubling and comforting. On the one hand, Jesus is ramping up the tension with those self-

justifying leaders who see no truth in Jesus' words or any need for what he has to offer. They do not believe. They are not among his sheep. Jesus has no need to coddle them in their unbelief.

How might this translate into a word that the folks sitting in your assembly need to hear and still will be able to hear? After all, both the preacher and the hearer are likely members of the religious establishment. How do we demonstrate a greater commitment to our self-justification than the humility of our need for Christ's cross-shaped justification?

On the other hand, in this hostile environment, Jesus has a word for those who would follow, to those who would believe. Who are those people? In Jesus' own words, they are the ones who listen to Jesus' voice. They get to know him, not so much intellectually, but experientially. They have come to know his love. They walk with and follow Jesus. They receive deep and lasting life from Jesus. They are given a deep and unassailable security. They are forever safe in Jesus' grip.

Likely many of your hearers are afraid. It's the one thing virtually all Americans have in common. From what we eat to what we drink to folks who are different to the volatility of the stock market and the instability of the American economy to the apparently daily danger of a terrorist attack, we are fed a steady diet of reasons to be afraid. The evening news is a rehearsal of what went wrong today and what we can expect to go wrong tomorrow. No wonder we're afraid!

Yet, fear is one of the opposites of faith. In the letter of 1 John the writer says, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out all fear..." (1 John 4:18a). No doubt, there are potential risks to everyday life. That's a constant of the human condition. We do not live in a completely benign world.

The promises of the Good Shepherd are an antidote to such fear. His voice cried out in desperation and abandonment from the cross. From the empty tomb—still empty and still worth celebrating on the Fourth Sunday of Easter—his voice beckons us to life. The ones who have heard and listened to the Shepherd's voice, the ones who have found life in the cleansing waters of baptism, the ones who are nurtured at the banquet table of the Lamb can live faithfully and confidently, knowing that in the midst of death they have been given life.

Jim Honig

Fifth Sunday of Easter

April 24, 2016

Acts 11:1–18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1–6

John 13:31–35

Engaging the Texts and Pastoral Reflections

The first lesson for this Sunday has to be one of the most supernatural sounding stories in the entire New Testament. It is completely foreign to my own twenty-first century experience of the life of faith. Peter has come to Jerusalem where the leaders are questioning why he has reached out to Gentiles. They are not happy. “Why did you go to these uncircumcised people?” they ask him. So Peter recounts the story of the vision he received in the preceding chapter, a vision he received not only once, but three times an identical vision. Then three men—strangers, not even yet converted to The Way!—showed up at his door and the Spirit told Peter to go with them. (I’m pretty sure that would not be my response if three strangers showed up at my front door with a similar invitation.) Peter eventually interprets the vision as a word from God that went against millennia of tradition within the people of God. The understanding of who’s in and who’s out was redefined in light of the new thing God was doing in Jesus.

The fulfillment of that new thing is pictured in the vision from The Revelation to John. The new heaven and the new earth include the multitude within whom the distinctions that have seemed so important to us this side of the veil disappear in the joy-filled enactment of God making God’s home with people.

But in the Gospel lesson, we’re not there yet. In fact, we’re not even to the resurrection yet.

It’s always been a source of delightful reflection and grist for the preacher’s mill to contemplate what it means in the final Sundays of the Easter Season to go back to the pivotal events of Thursday and Friday of Holy Week. How do these events get reinterpreted and reinvigorated in light of the resurrection?

In this reading from John, we return to the upper room on Maundy Thursday, to the prediction of betrayal and the shocking—and shockingly loving—action of the foot washing. The last supper, the foot washing, and ultimately the crucifixion are all animated by love. Divine love came to humanity, John so often reminds us, through the Word that became flesh. That Word showed forth his glory in his cruel death (*doxazo* is used five times in these few verses). In the dying and rising of the Father’s obedient Son, the human race learns the depth and height of the seeking Father’s missionary love for the world. The

body of Christ, so lovingly given in death, is now resurrected, bringing good news to the forlorn band of followers. That love now continues to emanate from the body of Christ—not the crucified, risen, and soon to be ascended body of Jesus—but from the community that was constituted in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

But it can’t be that divine love is something brand new, can it? New Testament scholar Raymond Brown writes that this divine love is not new because the first testament was lacking love, but because there are two peculiarly Christian modifications. This love is to be empowered by and modeled on the way Jesus manifested his love for his disciples by dying and rising for them. And it is a love that is to be extended to fellow Christian disciples (Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 352). And I would quickly add, to the world.

The power of disciples’ love for one another and for the world does not come from themselves, but from the preceding love of Christ for them, a love that has invited them into the Father’s love. In baptism that invitation is re-enacted and we are brought back to the very first chapter of John’s gospel where those who believe in the Word are given “power to become children of God” (John 1:12).

In the increasingly tense and polarized season of the presidential campaign, we often are exposed to the ugly reality of Christians behaving badly. We read of candidates lifting up their connection to the church and to Christianity, only to mouth policy proposals that exclude the other and advocate for dividing into us and them.

Beyond the headlines, millions of Christians demonstrate in word and deed neighborly love to those whom they meet in the ins and outs of daily living. A youth group gathers items to stock the kitchen, the bathroom, and the pantry of newly arriving immigrants. Church leaders make arrangements for a get-together with members of the mosque down the street in order to show solidarity with Muslims who are becoming the objects of scorn. A busy engineer stops by the grocery store to pick up dinner for the elderly neighbor next door who is still grieving the death of his wife. Where is that divine love taking on flesh through the followers of Jesus sitting in your pews?

To Peter’s point, there are no insiders and outsiders. All become the objects of the love God has shown in Christ. Embracing the multitudes of God’s children need not wait until the heavenly banquet room. Around the turn of the third century, church father Tertullian wrote, “But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See, they say, how they love one another.”

Jim Honig

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 1, 2016

Acts 16:9–15

Psalm 67

Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5

John 14:23–29 (or John 5:1–9)

Engaging the Texts

Today our focus is on the alternative gospel text from John 5. This story tells about a sign of Jesus' power, directly following his first sign at the wedding in Cana. This time Jesus is near a pool named Bethzatha (also called Bethesda or Betsaida), by the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. There are five porticos beside which many invalids lie waiting—blind, lame, paralyzed. It is a sad scene of people in need. We discover that one of them is a man who has been paralyzed for thirty-eight years! This man and those lying near him believe the pool has healing powers. When the water is stirred up, if a person enters the water he or she will be healed. Because this man cannot walk, people rush ahead of him when the water begins to move. He continuously loses his opportunity for healing.

Jesus does a simple thing. He asks the man, "Do you want to be healed? Take up your mat and walk." And he does! Following this story, some religious leaders challenge Jesus for performing this sign on the Sabbath. They miss the point: the man is healed. They fixate on the threat that Jesus has power and needs to be eliminated.

The Acts text features Paul following the vision that called him to go to Macedonia to preach the gospel. He meets Lydia who is a worshiper of God, a respected and capable business leader, a seller of purple cloth. She is so impressed by his message that she asks Paul to baptize her entire household. She, in turn, practices hospitality and invites Paul and his companions to stay at her home. This is yet another sign of the inclusive love of Jesus, in this case honoring a woman, a non-traditional act.

We move from Paul's vision to go to Macedonia to the vision of John of Patmos, signaling the healing, peacemaking, and self-giving love of God in a promise to live in the world through Jesus. Chapters 21 and 22 of Revelation are poetic, with beautiful images of a new world full of God's light. Like the Gospel of John, this text from Revelation promises healing—not just for ourselves but "for the healing of the nations."

Pastoral Reflections

One title for this set of texts might be "Water of Life"—a pool of healing water, the water of baptism for Lydia's household, the river of the water of life, and the leaves for the healing of the nations. Water is fundamental to our lives: the chaos of the sea

at the beginning of the world, the water of life in the womb of a mother, the power and healing of oceans and lakes and rivers, the renewal of being washed clean and the beginning of new life in baptism. God comes to us in earthly elements—wine, grain, and water.

For a period in my life I went to a therapy pool where I felt the healing power of warm water moving over my weary back muscles. I watched a woman, completely unable to walk, her small legs encased with braces. In the warm water of the therapy pool she could swim. She swam lap after lap two or three times a week. At that pool I saw many people who had broken necks or backs, or who suffered with chronic arthritis or constant pain. We were a community of disabled people for that period of time. I suspect that the community of our friendships healed us as well.

There wasn't such a caring community at the pool of Bethzatha. Competition and desperation were the rubrics. To get into the moving water to be healed, one had to be in the right place at the right time. When Jesus finds the man who had been ill for thirty-eight years, he doesn't ask him for his credentials. He just asks him if he wants to be made well. One might say he was in the right place at the right time, because he had no way to get into the pool without help from the community around him. But receiving help from Jesus does not depend on our timing, nor getting ourselves to the right place at the right time. Jesus is there when you need him. No charge. All we have to do is tell Jesus we need help.

A preacher might expand on the idea that we all need help at times. We are often hesitant to ask for help, whether it is from shame, pride, or fear of rejection. But God has put people into our lives who can be friends, companions, and helpers. That's what Christian community is about.

As it is with baptism, we don't have to prove ourselves in order to be welcomed into the commonwealth of God. Our faith is a gift given to us by God. When we turn to God, knowing our limitations (or as children, innocent and dependent) we are changed. Like the man beside the pool, our healing does not depend on our piety. His healing didn't depend on his attitude or his self-sufficiency. It depended only on faith, which is a gift of God's grace. The woman in the therapy pool may never walk but she is being healed. She knows her limitations and rejoices in her strengths, and she thanks God for all.

We have an image of an eternal future, where there will be a river, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God. And the leaves of the Tree of Life are for the healing of the nations. Peace like a river attends our way—we are healed and it is well with our soul.

Judith Mattison

Ascension of the Lord

May 5, 2016

Acts 1:1–11

Psalm 47 or Psalm 93

Ephesians 1:15–23

Luke 24:44–53

Engaging the Texts

It is possible that listeners may benefit from an introduction to the book of Acts. “Do you know what happened after the resurrection of Jesus? After the four Gospels? Today we begin with the text of the Ascension, from The Acts of the Apostles.”

We can remind listeners that Acts is a book of church history. After writing the story of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection, Luke turns toward tracing the early Christian movement. The first half of the book is focused on the Jerusalem church and its relationships. The latter half concentrates on Paul and his travels and teachings. Luke’s intention was to stir up faith by showing how the good news was successfully spread, and to defend Christians against the claim that they endangered Jewish institutions. Using engaging details of the men and women who believed in Jesus, Luke enlivens our interest and identification with the apostles. Reminding our parishioners of these things may draw them into this book that we have been reading during the Sundays after Easter.

In the book of Acts, Luke continues to write to Theophilus who may have been his patron or perhaps, simply “God-Lover”—the literal meaning of his name. Perhaps we can imagine that Luke is addressing each of us with that name! In the first part of Acts 1, Luke recaps the days following the death and resurrection of Jesus. He reminds us that Jesus told the apostles not to leave town, but to stay in Jerusalem and to expect the Holy Spirit to come soon. Jesus gave this promise to the disciples in the last verses of Luke 24.

Those apostles who will soon witness the ascension of Jesus begin with questions. “Is this the time? Will you restore the Kingdom of Israel now?” Jesus reminds them that they aren’t in a position to know such things—that is God’s work. God has the power. But they can expect to receive power and become witnesses to the life and grace of Jesus. “It will be your job to tell the story.” As Jesus is lifted up, two men in white robes stand by them. “Men of Galilee,” they say, “why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” They remind the apostles that Jesus will come again.

Our Ephesians text is similarly centered on apostles and followers being called to tell the story of God in Christ. This time it is Paul who is eager to thank the Ephesians for their loyal

love of all the saints. Paul prays that God will give them the spirit of wisdom and revelation. As their hearts are enlightened they will be filled with the hope to which they have been called. He proclaims God’s power in an inspiring pep talk, echoing the powerful language of Psalm 93.

Pastoral Reflections

Many of us have experienced the eagerness of children waiting to arrive at a destination. From the back seat a voice calls out, “Are we there yet?” Children’s sense of time is less acute than adults. Although they cannot easily judge how long a trip will be, they are far better than we at living in the moment, in God’s time. We are inclined to want to have our lives measured and predictable, under our control. Most children live with a greater freedom of trusting life.

Like children, the apostles ask, “Is it time yet? Is this the time when your kingdom will be restored?” Jesus responds that they cannot know the date—such things are under God’s authority and will happen in God’s time. “You will receive power through the Holy Spirit and your assignment is to be my witnesses to the end of the earth.” Then Jesus leaves them.

The two men in white robes who stood beside them after Jesus departed remind the apostles of their call: “It will be your job to tell the story. Rather than standing in astonishment gazing into heaven, you have an assignment here on earth.” So we come full circle with the early verses: this is a story of action, the acts of the apostles.

We are apostles today. Are we the ones who are eager to bring in the kingdom? The ones who say, “Is it time yet? How soon? What can I do to help? Let me tell you how I look at life. Do you want to come to church with me?” Such eager apostles operate on God’s time, open to unexpected callings. And they answer “yes” to the call. They act.

Or are we reluctant witnesses, afraid of the uncertainties of life, hesitant to open ourselves to the promise that Jesus is always with us and comes again and again. Do we demand to know the results of our efforts to follow Jesus before we attempt them? Do we squint our eyes against the light of the presence of Jesus in everyday events, our glimpses of the kingdom? Or do we watch eagerly for signs of God among us?

God’s time is full of surprises and God is our benevolent Creator. We are called to witness to Jesus and the acts of those who love and serve him.

Judith Mattison

Seventh Sunday of Easter May 8, 2016

Acts 16:16–34

Psalm 97

Revelation 22:12–14, 16–17, 20–21

John 17:20–26

Engaging the Texts

In our Gospel text Jesus is praying at the Last Supper. In today's world we might say he's praying about his legacy, knowing his days remaining on earth are surely numbered. He pleads on behalf of his disciples, and us, that we might be one, just as God and Christ are one. Jesus' prayer extends beyond that particular time and place to become a prayer that all people might know that God loved Christ before the foundation of the world and Christ, in turn, loves us. We imagine the vertical line from God to humanity and a horizontal line that connects humans to each other. Where the two lines cross is the nexus, the place where Jesus is found. "I in them and you in me," says Jesus, "so that the world may know that you have sent me."

Just about the time this Gospel passage begins to sound repetitive and confusing, we turn to a straightforward passage about the actions of Paul and Silas and a slave girl, all of them cherished people in God's eyes. This is the place where we see the horizontal line between human beings. The young girl in the Acts text is thought to have the spirit of fortune telling. She is held by two men who keep her in bondage and exploit her spirit to enrich themselves. She keeps following Paul and Silas around. Ironically, this slave girl cries out the truth: "These men are slaves of the Most High God." As we saw in Jesus' life, it is often the spirits who recognize the presence of God. It may seem strange that Paul was annoyed with such testimony, but he knew it was the spirit of divination speaking these words. He called the spirit to come out of her. "And it came out that very hour."

However, her freedom upsets her owners and threatens their income. They point out to the officials that Silas and Paul are "foreigners" who advocate customs that the Romans do not adopt or observe. A crowd gathers and attacks them, beating them and throwing Paul and Silas in prison.

Pastoral Reflections

There are several images in these passages. As indicated above, the first is the way Jesus points out that we are drawn to our neighbor because we have all been connected to our Creator through Jesus. The image of the cross is one way to

communicate this idea, with Jesus in the center of the intersection of humanity and God. Each time we make the sign of the cross we reinforce that connection. We can preach about the necessity to keep each of these connections strong: God with humanity, human beings with each other.

The theme of freedom and bondage rises up in the Acts text. An oppressed girl is changed by the intervention of Paul and Silas as they proclaim a new way to live. While we may not be enslaved like this young woman, we are bound in other ways—in bondage to the dissatisfaction of materialism, to patterns of life we are afraid to change. We are bound to our limited view of ourselves, unaware we have more to give, more to be. And we are in bondage to our past, our foolish mistakes, unwilling to ask for forgiveness, or to accept the freedom from guilt and shame offered in our baptism.

One has only to look in the newspaper or online to see oppressed people throughout the world. Our text calls us to proclaim the freedom found in forgiveness and the strength poured into us by a loving God. Such strength may call us to challenge the powers-that-be whether in a faraway country or the marketplace of an ancient Middle Eastern community. Sometimes, the oppression may be in our own community where systems of governance or finance keep people in bondage, unaware of their access to freedom. The Acts text calls us not only to preach Christ, but to act on his behalf to help free others. "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" (The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.)

The Acts story reminds us that challenging oppression may cause us to be beaten by authorities or crowds of angry people. In recent times we have another image: the fear people exhibit toward "foreigners" or strangers or these days, especially immigrants. We have a long history of crowds gathering to administer so-called "justice" to strangers—to Germans during a war, to innocent Black people hanging from a tree, to New York Italians or Jews—on and on. Crowd mentality can be frightening and can turn violent. We remember the strength of Moses to address such oppression and the compassion of Jesus to heal the wounds of injustice and motivate us to behave in kind ways, to be the Good Samaritan. When we are able to open ourselves to see and listen to the victims of oppression, violence, or unfairness, we can draw on the power of God to change our world. In those moments we have a glimpse of the living Jesus who calls to us, "Come! Come to the tree of life where you may be filled by the water of life." In the freedom of Christ we respond, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Judith Mattison

Day of Pentecost

May 15, 2016

Acts 2:1–21 (or Genesis 11:1–9)

Psalm 104:24–34, 35b

Romans 8:14–17 (or Acts 2:1–21)

John 14:8–17 (25–27)

Engaging the Texts

While we often leap directly to the Pentecost story in Acts, this Sunday offers a variety of options. Whether one ventures beyond Acts or not, there is great benefit in considering images in the other texts.

In Genesis, reveling in a unified language, seeking to make a name for themselves and stay together (and therefore powerful—even god-like), the people begin to build a tower toward heaven. God responds by breaking up the party, confusing their languages and sending them far afield. Juxtaposed with Acts, the people are scattered not gathered together, misunderstanding rather than understanding, seemingly disempowered.

The second chapter of Acts is so well known, beloved and yet honestly puzzling to many. Some find it wonderfully inspiring; others are quietly frightened by the unexpected and disorderly coming of the Spirit. A chapter earlier (1:8–9) before he ascends, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit's power and offers this clear calling: you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth. In chapter 2, this promised Holy Spirit shows up in a multi-sensory twist to the ancient Jewish harvest festival. It's all here: the sound of wind rushing, the tongues of fire, the gift of languages, and the ability for all to understand in their own native language. Peter is quick to step in and explain what all this means. He draws on the words of Joel to declare that these are indeed the awaited dreams and visions, the beginning of a new time of prophecy.

Amid the lengthy stories and so many words, Romans offers a short and powerful snippet. Rather than receiving the spirit of slavery and living in fear, we have received the spirit of adoption in which God's Spirit teams up with our spirits to confirm again our identity as children of God—heirs of both the burden and glory of this new, adoptive life.

Finally, in the Gospel of John, we hear the weaving words of how Jesus and his Abba abide, one with the other, and with the Spirit of truth, the Advocate. If we can't understand these relationships, then Jesus invites us to believe because of the works we see present—even the works we, too, will do. We are implicated in God's mission, and will have the Spirit's help and enlightenment.

Pastoral Reflections

Liturgically, some traditions place these Pentecost readings

at the end of the Easter arc, while others have Pentecost beginning the long arc through the last half of the year. Whether completing one arc or beginning another, we need to consider these different vantages. Are we in need of the Holy Spirit so we can carry on once the resurrected Jesus has ascended? Or, are we letting the Holy Spirit inspire all the ministry that is to come?

I served for many years in a community in the midst of transformation. In order to continue to do ministry in that neighborhood, the Holy Spirit was calling the congregation to be transformed in some gutsy, exciting, and terribly scary ways. The changes they experienced related to the building, but also to the culture and theology of the congregation, and the practice of worship and community life. This took many years as slowly we began to look and act more authentic to our setting.

Through it all, we prayed, in a variety of words and ways, for the Holy Spirit's leading. On the front end of the process, I wouldn't have expected that one of the many gifts of this experience for the congregation and for me as their leader, would be deeper value and comfort—even reliance—on the Holy Spirit, but that's what happened. We became a community that balanced a scrappy pragmatism with a deep yearning and trust for the Holy Spirit and her ways.

As our communities struggle with these readings today, it's important—even vital—to consider people's comfort or lack of comfort with the Holy Spirit and talk of the Spirit. For some it's completely natural and these are welcome readings. Others may keep their distance, even though the readings themselves are familiar. We all preach in different contexts.

I appreciate Nadia Bolz Weber's introductory story in a [Pentecost sermon](#) from the Festival of Homiletics in 2012. She describes a set of paraments her congregation once received. The reds included a descending dove that looked more raptor-like—truly dangerous. Annie Dillard suggests that the Holy Spirit's work might necessitate people being issued crash helmets and life jackets instead of the once common fancy hats of yesteryear. Both of these stories give way to images of the Spirit and its power to take us places beyond our familiar comfort.

How is the Holy Spirit calling your community into new ventures? How is the Spirit sustaining and renewing you? What help can we find in the assurance of the Gospel and its abiding love, when paired with the Acts text that invites us into prophetic visions? How are imagination and creativity gifts of the Spirit in your community? How are we reveling in the diversity of languages and truly understanding, and how are we struggling? How do you and your community speak about God's deeds of power? Or, focusing on the psalm, what would a sermon look like about the Spirit as she renews the face of the earth? In all this talk about the Holy Spirit, I seek to find both the handhold where people can connect, and the vision that takes us another step toward being what the Spirit calls us to be.

Jen Nagel

Trinity Sunday

May 22, 2016

Proverbs 8:1–4, 22–31

Psalm 8

Romans 5:1 – 5

John 16:12 – 15

Engaging the Texts

In Year A on Trinity Sunday, we hear the first creation story, then the great commission to go and baptize in the name of our Triune God. In Year B we hear Isaiah's call in the temple as seraphs fly to and fro and the gospel story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night. This year, Year C, all our readings are relational in nature.

Proverbs often catches readers and hearers alike by surprise. Who is this feminine personification of Woman Wisdom (or Lady Wisdom)? As we stretch our language and widen our biblical images of God, there is something permission-giving in this text from Proverbs—it is poetic, beautiful, and approachable for many. For preachers less familiar with Woman Wisdom, this is a good opportunity to do some additional homework and to help the community understand what we know of this part of Proverbs. Here Wisdom tells us that she was the first of God's creation long ago. The choice of verbs in verse 22 (in various translations: created, acquired, or possessed) gave way in the fourth century to debates between the Arians and the Orthodox, a debate that prompted the line in the Nicene Creed clarifying that Christ was “begotten, not made.” In Proverbs, Wisdom speaks of her involved role in creation: beside the creator, like a master worker, finding delight and joy in the birth of creation's relationships and God's relationship to creation.

The psalm invites us into a posture of praise, heads tilted back in awe at the night sky, pondering the age-old questions, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” A sermon with eco-justice themes could rise from this text as one explores the role of the individual and the community, what it means that God is mindful and cares for us, and that we have dominion over what God first created.

In Romans, all three parts of the Holy Trinity have a role in this essential passage about faith. Hearing references to Romans 5, Lutherans often go directly to the promises of justification. We risk glossing over the way the three parts of the Trinity are at work interdependently to bring about this justification. The suffering, endurance, character, and hope may also be instructive as one explores further the attributes of the different characters in the Trinity.

The Gospel of John for this Sunday is part of Jesus' farewell discourse. Jesus has more to teach and tell, but we will need to rely on the Spirit of truth to guide us, indeed, “explain us,”

into that truth. The image of a muse in the ear comes to mind; the Spirit doesn't speak independently, but instead the Spirit shares whatever the Spirit first hears.

Pastoral Reflections

Trinity Sunday is the only festival all about a doctrine of the church. In this post-modern time, as institutions and doctrines have different (or at least changing) value, I find less traction in proclaiming the good news of a doctrine, and much more resonance tapping into people's yearning for holy mystery. As I reflect on preaching on Trinity Sunday, I consider these three elements.

Holy Mystery. Holy mystery isn't quite as easy to spot in this cycle's readings as in Isaiah 6, for instance, but it's certainly there. By its nature, holy mystery isn't supposed to be easily spotted, but rather experienced. This is a day for inspiring awe and wonder and the texts, in particular the psalm, offer this in abundance. Classic hymns like “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty,” infuse this wonder and acknowledge our human need to hold something beyond ourselves in awe.

Relationship. One God in three persons. By its very definition, relationship is at the heart of the Trinity. For many, this dance of relationship is one of the best ways to begin to grasp what Trinity is all about. If we have a God who is relational in God's very self, how much this informs our way of living as God's people—relational, engaging, dynamic. Each of the texts offers ample examples of relationship. I also turn to art and poetry. Andrei Rublev's Trinity pictures the three visitors whom Abraham and Sarah hosted, and invites us to consider the way relationship and hospitality open us to God in new ways. Kathleen Norris' poem Kitchen Trinity is another avenue for approaching our wonderfully relational Trinity. Both can be found widely online and could be used (with appropriate permissions) in visuals, a bulletin cover, a poetry option, or more.

Expansive Language. Trinity Sunday is an ideal day to invite the congregation to consider our language for God. It may be as simple as taking time for people to jot a brainstormed list of names and descriptors for God (shepherd, healer, savior, creator, sustainer, advocate, lover, and so on). For some, this is more easily done with some structure; they could think about words that might describe God the Father, then God the Son, and finally God the Holy Spirit. The Proverbs text and the Gospel both lend themselves to this discussion, and offer a chance to consider gender and our own comfort/discomfort as we widen our language. A preacher might craft a prayer drawing from the God language the community has offered, and celebrating our mortal attempts to name and describe the divine. The good news on Trinity Sunday is God's power—so much stronger by its relational nature—to continuously renew us and God's church.

Jen Nagel

Second Sunday after Pentecost May 29, 2016

1 Kings 8:22–23, 41–43

Psalm 96:1–9

Galatians 1:1–12

Luke 7:1–10

Engaging the Texts

A strong foundation matters. The 100-year-old church building where I serve was built so well it hasn't moved an inch. Strong mortar and bricks are key, but more importantly, it's the prayer-soaked walls and lives of the saints that make for a firm foundation. In 1 Kings, Solomon declares a foundational thesis statement for the life of faith: God is steadfast, a God of all the peoples on earth. This steadfast love (*hesed*) is the foundation of the covenant between God and God's people. God is the builder and sustainer of this foundation. Our trust in this God is evidence of our obedience to the covenant. And the non-negotiable aspect of this covenant is relationship. Our faithful, promise-keeping God wants to relate to and with us. As God yearns for us, we yearn for God. The yearning is the mortar that makes the foundation strong.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians we meet a disappointed apostle. Should Gentiles live like Jews and participate in all the Jewish religious customs, such as circumcision? A certain group insists that all converts should observe the Jewish law. Paul, of course, knows this undermines the freedom given by the gospel. Salvation by works is just another way of claiming we do not trust God's grace to be sufficient. This theological pit is also a way of steering us away from the call to relationship with self, others, and God.

The story in Luke's gospel gives Jesus an opportunity to teach the crowd about faith. It's a follow-up to his previous teachings in Chapter 6 in his sermon on the plain. The reader is introduced to a centurion, a person who personifies goodness without calling attention to his good deeds, or himself. What he does flows out of relationship, out of his deep love for his servant. The officer exemplifies what Jesus has been teaching about building a house on a strong foundation that can't be shaken (6:48). This also makes an interesting connection with the centurion's help in building a synagogue, as well as Solomon's prayer at the temple dedication.

Jesus paints a picture of faith in the figure of the centurion. Luke's story aligns with Matthew's (8:5–13) for the most part. However, in Matthew, the centurion goes straight to Jesus, while Luke has Jesus using a middle person. Luke seems to want to highlight the centurion's humility.

Pastoral Reflections

A parishioner faces complex eye surgeries, but doesn't want any fussing. "Oh, you don't need to come to the hospital." I tell her it's what we do—show up in pre-op for prayer. She reminds me of the Roman officer who doesn't want to bother Jesus, so he sends messengers who advocate on his behalf. This powerful leader is in a heart-wrenching place. A man dear to him (his servant) is near death. Though he commands 100 men, his compassion zeros in on this one. I think of the shepherd going after one lost sheep. This is an intimate story. The dying man receives hospice care in the home of the centurion.

The officer understands the pressures of people in authority who oversee many others. I also wonder if he is sensitive about placing Jesus in the compromising situation of entering a Gentile home. Or perhaps he doesn't feel, as a Gentile, worthy of requesting the healing he *knows* Jesus is capable of commanding.

This is the first account of a Gentile approaching Jesus in Luke. This is what we know about the centurion: he is respected, caring, wealthy, humble, generous (*he built our synagogue*). He has authority, makes commands, and in some ways, treats Jesus as a peer. "Just give the order," he asserts. This is language he knows. But, now the roles have changed. He knows his limits; he cannot heal his beloved servant. He cannot order life. In this department, Jesus is the one with authority. Jesus' word/command brings healing. The officer counts on this, has faith in this.

We can't miss the irony that it's a Gentile, not a disciple, to whom Jesus gives unprecedented high praise (v. 9). He commends the officer's faith in recognizing who he is, without personally encountering Jesus. Jesus heals from a distance. The centurion trusts Jesus' authority to be God's word, to act on God's behalf.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians Paul expresses anger at the evils of preaching a perverted gospel, and not the gospel soaked through and through with grace. It fits our economy of fairness and self-reliance to rely on good works. But in all these texts, it's the centurion who models faith, who counts on Jesus' gift of new life, unearned and generously given to all who come seeking, insiders and outsiders alike.

No one is outside the realm of Jesus' gaze. Almost every day a Hindu graduate student prays in our sanctuary. I often interrupt his contemplation, not expecting someone to be praying there during the week! He humbly asks me to pray for his family. He brings an "ancient expectation," fully expecting to encounter God. He comes seeking, like the centurion, and teaches me about expecting and receiving grace.

Mary Halvorson

Third Sunday after Pentecost June 5, 2016

1 Kings 17:17–24 (to give the widow her full narrative due, we begin with v. 8)

Psalm 30

Galatians 1:11–24

Luke 7:11–17

Engaging the Texts

God works through the prophets. Yes, that's true—but maybe God works through a poor nameless widow. Perhaps her radical hospitality toward Elijah opened him to a deepened sense of call as a prophet. This Sunday we engage two stories of two widows and two sons. As we plumb these texts, we encounter isolation and death turned into community and life. The poetry of Psalm 30 describes what we can imagine the widows doing after their sons are restored to them: *weeping spends the night, joy comes in the morning. Wailing is turned to dancing.*

We need to grasp the plight of women in biblical times. Widows are at the bottom of the economic ladder. Without husbands or sons they have no income, no future, no status. This reality guarantees a bleak future. The widow in 1 Kings languishes in stark contrast to the arrogant King Ahab, who harshly rules an idolatrous nation in a time of drought and famine. He has decreed that all God's prophets be put to death. The plight of women continues in Jesus' day when a woman who finds herself widowed is cast into poverty and struggle, with no safety net. At least a son connects her to land, inheritance, and status. But when he dies, her life is in double jeopardy. She is fully dependent on the kindness and charity of others.

This was the system oppressive and cruel to women. Yet, the widow of Zaraheth is still able to claim her own power. Power is the ability to act. In her we find power. She is not a passive, dependent figure in this story. She weighs her options, makes her choice. She offers the prophet food as she and her son lay dying.

Power and compassion. The Greek word for compassion is *splagchnon*: to split a gut, be deeply shaken, feel passion with and for another. It comes from the noun meaning bowels, heart, lungs, liver, kidneys—organs considered at the center of human emotions. Jesus literally split his gut for the widow. His heart ached for her. The verb “to have compassion” occurs twelve times in the New Testament and only in the gospels. In Luke it appears three times: in our story and the parables of the Prodigal Son and Good Samaritan. By touching the open coffin, Jesus renders himself ritually unclean. Compassion trumps legalism. Jesus speaks with power and authority, for the sake of another, and healing happens.

Pastoral Reflections

We will be led from wellspring to wellspring as we learn and relearn to trust that God does provide, often in surprising, out-of-the-way places and people.

Though it's a bleak picture, something amazing emerges in these stories. The widow serves Elijah a drink and a bit of food. God's hospitality shows up in this place of suffering. The brook is dried up, but God provides. Elijah comes in need, seeking from someone seemingly bereft of all life. God tells him the widow will feed him. And she does. This is Elijah's lesson in radical dependence on God. When the brooks in our life are empty, when we are without resources, these are the times we are in training. We discover God shows up, providing what we need, often surprisingly through the care of others.

I wonder, if we are not just a bit intimidated by this nameless woman. She is about to die with her little boy, and manages to love her neighbor as herself. She still has her humanity and makes room for a meal for this stranger. Powerful!

Jesus comes to the town of Nain with a crowd and is met at the gate by a funeral procession. Two crowds converge—one in grief, the other curious, wanting to touch and be healed by Jesus. Doesn't this often happen in the parish? We tend various stories at the same time: a baby's baptism is celebrated as a couple struggling with fertility is watching. A text reminds one parishioner of a personal tragedy, while it comforts another. Prayers for a freshly married couple sting the couple on the verge of divorce. In your preaching, tell with a story about how God acts in these times, how Jesus beckons us toward life, how an encounter with him is an opening to life and healing. (See Ann Lamott's *Traveling Mercy*, p. 63 ff.)

These texts provide a chance to describe powerful ways in which the community of faith functions to restore. We can truly only know ourselves in community. One of the worst things about being sick is isolation. Much of Jesus' healing was integrating individuals back into community. Who in your congregation and community is sick and alone?

It's important to note that Jesus has no predictable method or pattern for healing. Jesus heals with spit and without, with faith present and when it's not, with a word and without, with touch and from a distance. There is no mention of faith in Luke's story. The mother doesn't even request Jesus' help. Jesus gives help out of compassion for her grief. No person is to be dismissed or despised. This is what Jesus does and who he is. This is the essence of God: a gut-wrenching, full of compassion One who raises the oppressed and forgotten back to life, who pays attention to suffering. If there's any pattern for us, this is it.

Mary Halvorson

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost June 12, 2016

2 Samuel 11:26—12:10, 13–15

Psalm 32

Galatians 2:15–21

Luke 7:36—8:3

Engaging the Texts

In the passage preceding the assigned text in Luke, Jesus is accused of befriending sinners. And here, in Luke 7:36 ff., we have an example of how Jesus does just that. Luke wants the readers to see Jesus as the Messiah, a Messiah who forgives and receives the tears and kisses of gratitude from an adoring and loving woman. Contrasts abound in the story. Simon uses oil, which is cheap, and the woman uses ointment, which is expensive. The first is a tepid and stingy approach to love. The second is a lavish and unrestrained approach to love.

The Old Testament story is troubling at best. The context is David's seemingly unforgivable action of the premeditated murder of Uriah so he might marry the beautiful Bathsheba. While she is still grieving, David wastes no time in marrying her. God is not at all pleased. Not satisfied with all God's provisions for him, David desires what is not his, another man's wife. Nathan, the prophet, confronts the king. This is not how an anointed king is to act. Though David confesses, and God does forgive through the prophet's absolution, all is not well in their household. "The sword shall never depart from your house" (v. 10). This is difficult for us as readers to understand, that the victim of this sword will be an innocent child. The result of David's murdering action has consequences. We do not live in isolation, our misdeeds affect others. The story does not wrap up neatly and joyfully.

All the texts for this Sunday address our human shortcomings, and describe a God who has our backs, even in the worst of our sin, as in David's case. Paul reminds the Galatians of the freedom they have in Christ. They need to be reminded over and over again that they are not dependent on works, but on God's grace. This is the starting and ending point for all of us. A man in his last days in hospice care described his faith with words Paul would happily echo, "I feel suspended by grace and dependent on love." In the poetry of Psalm 42, we hear the pleas of someone in exile, feeling distant from God. Yet, in this experience the psalmist prays that God would show God's constant love during the day, so that I may have a song at night, a prayer to the God of my life (v. 8). In spite of ourselves, God gives us a song to sing, "my life goes on in endless song, above earth's lamentation, I hear the real though far off hymn, that hails a new creation..."

Pastoral Reflections

Luke introduces a nameless woman, whose only title is a sinner. Many assume her sin is prostitution, a handy sin to tack onto a woman. She enters the home of Simon, an upright follower and keeper of the law. Her actions break scads of social rules. A man didn't publically speak to his wife, let alone another woman and a sinner. A woman wasn't to have uncovered hair. Letting it loose was grounds for divorce. Jesus let the woman touch and kiss him, making him impure. Simon was scandalized. Luke pushes the envelope of out-of-line behavior as far as he can.

Luke employs the literary tool of contrast. Simon's sin is ignoring his obligation of hospitality. Hers is audacious, over-the-top hospitality. She loved much because she was forgiven much. Go in peace, Jesus tells her, into your new life. Simon hoards hospitality, and withholds its distribution.

Jesus tells a parable to bring home this message of forgiveness. It's not what Simon wants to hear. When a story tells a truth, there's no escape. Nathan tells a story and without realizing it, in his outburst, the guilty David implicates himself. "You are the man." Such direct speech we wouldn't want to hear. David will face terrible consequences. But the true anguish will lie with the mother, who grieves another death.

Simon is not a bad person, just a poor host. He reminds me of the older brother of the prodigal son. Why can't Simon rejoice that she has found her way again? Simon, if you weren't so obsessed with your own perfection and purity, you could know God's love and forgiveness. Then you might want to join the party Jesus hosts to which all are invited, including a woman of the city.

I highly recommend the homiletically rich Irish movie, *Calvary*, about a parish priest with a big heart serving a small seaside congregation with a healthy dose of troubled parishioners. James, the intelligent and tough loving priest, joined the priesthood after the death of his wife. In a moving scene his troubled adult daughter asks him, after her suicide attempt: "Will you forgive me?" "Always," he responds. "Always."

Always, is God's answer. Always, Jesus cried on the cross, as he bore the suffering of the world. But, we chime in with Simon, there must be limits to this business of forgiving. Our default is fairness, justice, score keeping. Can't we go too far offering God's forgiveness? To this question Father James in the movie responds, "The limits to God's mercy have not yet been set."

Mary Halvorson

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost June 19, 2016

Isaiah 65:1–9

Psalm 22:19–28

Galatians 3:23–29

Luke 8:26–39

Engaging the Texts

On some elemental level, the early church wanted us to see the strange story of an isolated demon-possessed man as a baptismal story. Shackles are loosened. Demons are drowned in water. A troubled man is finally clothed and in his right mind. In baptism, we are “clothed with Christ” (Gal 3:27). Old divisions are washed away (3:28) and new people are formed through water and the word. The multiple lake crossings in Luke suggest an attempt to unite ethnically opposite sides of the sea through a new sacramental unity. The difficulty of the sea-crossing in the previous story suggests that there will always be countervailing winds trying to keep the church from reaching out to people on the other side.

The details of this story—exorcism, nudity, clothing—bring to mind the multiple layers of the ancient catechumenate where baptismal candidates engaged in a long catechetical accompaniment with seasoned disciples, culminating in extended scrutiny (exorcism) during Lent, baptism without clothing at the Easter Vigil, and the donning of a new robe as the community welcomed new converts to the table. The renunciation in modern baptismal liturgies has been greatly compressed over the centuries, but still powerfully reveals what is at stake in a Christian community serious about engaging demonic forces that seek to isolate and segregate.

The text from Isaiah 65 claims that those who avoid God’s agenda “sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places” (65:4), the locus of the demoniac in Luke. Isolation and distance from the ways of God ironically also imprison people in ways similar to those who are feared and segregated in literal tombs.

Instead of celebrating with the healed man, the townspeople ask Jesus “to leave them” (8:37). Jesus may infuriate people who prefer the old arrangement and a comforting predictability. In thirty years as a pastor, I’ve heard a variety of rather mundane reasons offered for departure from church life, ranging from disagreement over a worship schedule to hurt feelings when an expected meal wasn’t delivered during illness. I suspect the far more common (but usually unexpressed) reason for departure from a community of faith is a secret distaste for Jesus and his teachings, a weariness of where the man is calling us and where we don’t want to go. For many people, an authentic encounter with Jesus may be more repulsive than compelling.

Pastoral Reflections

You’re in the waiting area of your local hospital. It’s late; the halls are quiet. The nursing staff brings a pillow in case you want to sleep even though you know there’s little chance of that. Someone you love is behind those ominous doors. They’ve been there for days, hanging between life and death. You wait, bleary-eyed, as the hours of the evening drip toward dawn like a slow faucet. Suddenly a doctor appears and calls your name. Here it comes; the word you’ve been waiting for. It could go either way.

Out of the doctor’s mouth is the best possible news—recovery, restoration. Everything will be okay with some time. Maybe you break down and cry. Maybe you hug the doctor with all your might. Maybe you run out into the hospital parking lot and shout a prayer of gratitude.

But here’s something I doubt you’ll do. I doubt you will look at that doctor with fear and say, “Will you please leave now? I don’t want you here. Will you please get out of this waiting room?”

The man lived in a cemetery. It was almost like being buried alive. His torment was so intense that he often broke the chains and roamed around naked in the wilderness like an animal. People would go find him, catch him; bring him back. There was quite a bit of energy and money spent making sure this poor man remained shackled and isolated. His segregation was in the county budget, so to speak.

I was a student chaplain at an old prison on the banks of a river before it was torn down. There was a subterranean section of the prison that saw very little light. Segregated there were inmates then known as “the criminally insane.” The men were housed in separate cells, often naked and yelling; a bleak and hopeless place. I think of a man I used to talk to below ground. His name was Leonard. He spat on my friend once, right in the face; howled at the top of his lungs at times. It was hard to keep returning.

Jesus heals this particular Leonard among the Gerasenes. Jesus goes out of his way—all the way across the lake, out of his home territory—to get to this man. Leonard has broken loose from his graveyard chains again. Just won’t stay in the cemetery. (Come to think of it, neither will Jesus later on).

All these odd details: the nudity, demons, loud howling; more eerie voices than ever inhabited Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*, the drowning pigs.

But in the middle of a story with enough drama to give even Stephen King nightmares, one detail grabs me. The man receives healing and the voices are quiet. But does anyone celebrate with this poor man, clothed and in his right mind? Not a soul in the city comes forward to even shake Leonard’s hand. Here’s the real kicker: “All the people of the surrounding country asked Jesus to leave” (8:37).

“Impressive what you’ve done here today, Mister Jesus. But

we'd really like you to go away. There's a train leaving at noon."

It may be a lot easier living *without* Jesus than with him. Without Jesus in our lives, it's so easy to segregate undesirables over in a corner of town. Without Jesus, I can tip my cap to God situationally rather than follow this nut into dark places on a daily basis. Without Jesus, I can keep all my money for myself rather than wasting it on lost causes. Without Jesus, I can be comfortable with exactly who I am and remaining that way until I die.

Don't be too hard on these townspeople. "Go away Jesus," they say. I may not say that out loud, but if I'm honest, my behavior resembles theirs in a hundred similar ways. "You are welcome *here* in my life, Jesus. But certainly not over there."

Frank Honeycutt

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost June 26, 2016

1 Kings 19:15–16, 19–21

Psalm 16

Galatians 5:1, 13–25

Luke 9:51–62

Engaging the Texts

Jesus turns toward Jerusalem. He "set his face" (Luke 9:51) toward the city and you know what happened there. This summer we'll encounter a block of teaching known as "The Travel Narrative" in the gospel of Luke. Jesus is on the road from chapter nine through chapter nineteen. We're invited to walk with him and learn what it means to be a disciple.

Part of what it means is that disciples will be offended by Jesus before they're enchanted. The fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:23) are perhaps born in us through an initial holy offense, chipping away at expectations of how a messiah is supposed to behave and save us. Paul describes a collision of worlds as he contrasts the "works of the flesh" with the "fruits of the Spirit." Read these lists closely and slowly this week. One doesn't come by the fruits of the Spirit through osmosis or luck. One receives them by embracing another world. The collision can be costly and loud.

The crowds surely thinned out along the way as Jesus moved toward the city. I wonder if leaders in today's church growth movement skip these offensive sayings of Jesus altogether for fear of losing people. But here's a truth: if we're never offended by Jesus, we're not reading the man all that closely.

Jesus begins this journey and right off the bat encounters three would-be disciples—potential church members we might call them. They're all interested in Jesus. Give them credit. One says, "Lord, I'd be glad to hit the road with you, but I've got to bury my dad first." It's a reasonable request, isn't it? Isn't this

man partially fulfilling the Fourth Commandment, honoring mom and dad? "I'm coming," says this man. "I'll be there, but first let me take care of this one little thing." Request denied.

Coupled with the odd call of Elisha (1 Kgs 19:19–20), the Gospel lesson confronts a rather shocking candidate for idolatry: the idol of home and hearth. "Jesus never said to choose him over the devil, but to choose him over family" (Fred Craddock). The word "first" appears twice in these verses, revealing primary loyalties. Jesus' response seems uncompromising, even rude.

There is perhaps no more instinctual love for any of us than the love of family. But if I love my family—mother, father, wife, children—*more* than Christ and allow that familial love to usurp my following of Jesus, then I will ultimately be unable to do my family much good. Some good, yes. But unless I place Christ first and learn from him how to love those whom God has given me to love, then my attempts at love will always be too limiting, maybe too suffocating, and probably even blinding me to the needs of others who are also my "family," according to our theology of baptism.

Whenever a person "joins the church," it is to this new family that a person pledges primary allegiance. Not because we are to ignore those blood kin living under our respective roofs, but because we cannot give them the love they need until Jesus and his kingdom are first. Perhaps our American families are in such a mess today because we have forgotten this.

Pastoral Reflections

William Faulkner, the great writer from Mississippi, was once asked how he would advise people who had read *The Sound and the Fury* once or twice, but who were still in the dark and just didn't get it. "Read it three times," he said.

One of the things I love about the Bible is that it cannot be read quickly. It is not meant to instantly inspire us. It is full of paradox and mystery and surprise. If you don't appreciate these three things you will not appreciate the Bible. Readers who forage through the Bible looking for snappy wisdom or fast-food truth will be regularly disappointed. This is not so much due to the obvious hurdle of being written twenty to twenty-five centuries ago—that has something to do with it, but it's not the main thing.

The Bible cannot be read quickly because *the world described therein* is on a collision course with the world we now live in. Reading the Bible seriously is often difficult because there is a kingdom coming in its pages that seeks to displace the world we've grown accustomed to.

The Bible seeks nothing less than a transformed person living in a transformed community of faith, the church. Reading the Bible can therefore be a rather threatening, uncomfortable enterprise because at every turn we are confronted with odd stories and strange teachings and rather dense truths that seek

to pry us away from life in one world and usher us into life in another. We resist this mightily. We resist because we are so immersed in a culture of spiritual suffocation, so at home with the American way of life.

The Bible, in contrast, is concerned with a different sort of citizenship in the kingdom of God that supersedes *all* other political and cultural allegiances. God is first and primary. So there will be this large and loud crash when we read the Bible seriously. We will feel in the dark and lost much of the time in its pages. This is good. You're on the right track. I commend the book to you, of course. But if you're the type of person who likes instant, immediate understanding, well, I suggest you'll stay away from the Bible. If you do plan to stick with it, remember William Faulkner's advice.

Frank Honeycutt

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 3, 2016

Isaiah 66:10–14

Psalm 66:1–9

Galatians 6:(1–6), 7–16

Luke 10:1–11, 16–20

Engaging the Texts

It's striking how much Jesus talks about food. He's constantly eating with people, "drinking deeply with delight" (Isa 66:11) and dining with ostracized folk. We tend to think of Jesus as a thin wispy man; almost all Christian art depicts him this way. But reading Luke closely, he's always munching on something with somebody. You could make a case that Jesus was eventually crucified because he ate with all the wrong people, one too many times.

So it should not surprise us that Jesus takes time to give detailed instructions about food, eating, and meals before sending (*apostello*) his followers out on a mission. Taken as a whole, these are rather strange directions for those commissioned to share news about the kingdom of God: "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals." Not even an evangelism tract.

Out of all the curious directions that Jesus shares with the twelve and also the seventy, he takes time to mention table manners and menu concerns *twice* before he sends them out. "Remain in the same house," he says, "eating and drinking whatever they provide." Then a bit later: "When people welcome you, *eat what is set before you.*"

I wonder if our evangelism attempts often fail because we feel the need to bring something forced and foreign to complete strangers. I suspect you've answered a knock at the door to greet a well-scrubbed Christian stranger who wants to talk about Jesus, pouring out everything they know about

the Savior. I have to hand it to them. At least they're out there trying to share their faith.

"Religion," claims Richard Rohr, "has not tended to create seekers or searchers, has not tended to create honest, humble people who trust that God is always beyond them. Religion has, rather, tended to create people who think they have God in their pockets, people with quick, easy, glib answers." Maybe this is why we've tended to shy away from traditional forms of evangelism. "A new creation" (Gal 6:15) is always fashioned by Christ rather than our boastful efforts (6:14). Perhaps we're starting in the wrong place. We are sent as apostles first as receivers—from Christ, and from those to whom we are sent.

Pastoral Reflections

A confession: very often I become timid about evangelism because I think I need to set the agenda and control what happens in the conversation, interrupting somebody's life with a much better deal that they've somehow overlooked. But that's not the advice Jesus gives. Jesus advises the would-be evangelist to not take along—*anything* at all. "Remain in the same house... Eat what is set before you." It's not that *we* set the agenda; the other person does.

Christians are known for their giving. We give clothing; we give food; we give money, and sometimes advice. We give to the needy and the sick and less fortunate. We are givers and that is good. Giving is an important mark of discipleship. But this lesson says that the evangelist is first of all *a receiver*. We are not used to this, but here is the undeniable sense of this text. We remain in *their* house. We receive *their* food. This means that someone who seeks to share Jesus does not come with a pre-planned agenda, "seven steps to salvation" and all that. No. "Eat what is set before you."

If we're listening, a lot is set before us. How would it change the way we think about evangelism if we concentrated first on what we might receive rather than what we have to give?

One of my passions as a pastor is thinking hard about why and how people come to believe and trust in Jesus. I've had hundreds of conversations with agnostics and atheists, their religious upbringing or lack thereof, and why they remain distanced from God and the church. Of those I've had a small hand in leading to Jesus, I can tell you quickly that the most important initial thing from an evangelism perspective was simply getting to know them and receiving their questions non-defensively. I've begun to understand that this is part of what Jesus means when he says, "Remain in the same house and eat what is set before you." Authentic evangelism is about meeting people where *they* live with the concerns *they* bring. We need to stop counting heads in the Lutheran church, worrying about church attendance.

There is a telling opening line in the Gospel lesson. The followers of Jesus are sent out in pairs "to every town and place

where he himself intended to go.” Now I’m sure that Jesus could bring people around to the kingdom of God without our help. But there is something about our legwork that is preparatory for the arrival of Jesus.

When we are meeting for a meal and conversation with an old friend who cannot quite believe the Bible’s promises; when we take the time to truly listen to the story of a homeless person in our neighborhood; when we stop in the driveway and hear the sharing from a neighbor who’s been away from church for thirty years; when we *receive* from others when our usual evangelism posture is to want to give something, we are doing something vital and holy. *We are eating and digesting what is set before us.* And we are preparing the very place where Jesus himself intends to go.

Frank Honeycutt