

Preaching Helps

Pentecost 6, July 1 — Pentecost 20, October 7

Summertime: Mark and John and Abundant Bread

This issue of “Preaching Helps” takes us from the beginning of July through the first Sunday in October. If you’ve been preaching for a few years, you probably know that this lectionary year spends five weeks on John chapter 6. That is a lot of bread! Perhaps this is why pastors take vacation in the month of August, at least in Year B! Our writers engage this chapter starting on July 29 with John’s story of Jesus feeding 5000 people with a boy’s lunch. If you’re not up for five weeks of bread, you may decide to step outside John’s gospel and engage the other appointed readings. One possibility is to dig deeply into Ephesians, the Second Reading for July 15 through August 26. Preaching a series of sermons on an epistle gives people a chance to learn about the setting for the letter, the particular concerns addressed by the writer, and live more fully within the letter rather than dipping a toe in one Sunday. You can encourage people to read the letter at home and imagine themselves as part of the church in Ephesus. The First Readings from Exodus, 1 Kings, Proverbs, and Joshua, also offer vivid images for preaching. Two important feast days honoring women also come during the summer months: Mary Magdalene on July 23 and Mary, mother of Jesus, on August 15. Neither of these dates falls on a Sunday but give yourself permission to honor these two Marys on July 22 and August 12. If you choose to stay with John 6 for five weeks, you’ll find ample help in the following pages.

We return to Mark’s gospel on September 2 and begin reading through the letter of James. The abundance of bread in John 6 is challenged by the Syrophenician woman on September 9: “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Will there be any bread for her and her daughter from the baskets left over in John 6? September is marked by the anticipation of a new school year and people returning to worship after summer travels. There may also be a sense of wistfulness as vacation days have passed too quickly and a grown-up child leaves home for college for the first time. Even if our lives are no longer marked by the academic calendar, something in our cells remembers end-of-summer as a time when something new is about to happen.

We welcome several new writers for this summer issue of “Preaching Helps.” Though some are new to *Currents*, these writers often appear in other publications. They span the United States from California and Washington to New

Jersey. **Patrick Cabello Hansel** has served for thirty-three years in multicultural communities in the Bronx, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis. With his wife, Luisa, he pastors San Pablo/St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. Together they began the Semilla Center for Healing and the Arts. Patrick is a poet and fiction writer. His book of poems *The Devouring Land* will be published by Main Street Rag Publishing in early 2019. **Mary Halvorson** and her husband, Dan Garness, are co-pastors of Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, a church surrounded by the University of Minnesota and the University of Minnesota Hospital. This is Mary’s twenty-fifth year as pastor of Grace. When she is not wrestling with sermons, she delights in her two granddaughters, reading, running, and collecting stories and ideas. **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. **Joseph Schattauer Pailé** is the pastor of Advent Lutheran Church in Wyckoff, New Jersey. He is a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary and St. Olaf College. You can find his writing in *The Cresset*, *Perspectives*, and the “Reinterpreting Mission” edition of *Currents*. **John Rollefson** is a familiar friend in these pages. An ELCA pastor, he has served urban and campus ministries in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, and Los Angeles, plus interims in Solvang and London. John’s book *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C* is now available, along with Years A and B. (Editor’s note: these three books are wonderful resources for preachers.) John and his wife, Ruth, live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church. **Bradley Schmelting** serves as senior pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, St. Paul, Minnesota. A graduate of Ohio University and Trinity Lutheran Seminary, he did doctoral work at Emory University in ritual studies and pastoral care. He has served congregations in Columbus, Ohio and Atlanta, Georgia, and now lives in the Twin Cities with his husband, Darin, learning to love winter and trusting the promise of spring.

Hopefully God will surprise the people and the preacher even though we’re still in “Ordinary Time” for several more weeks. Perhaps it will be like the surprise of hearing an Advent text from Isaiah in September: “For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.” (First Reading for September 9) Perhaps you’ll splash the congregation with water on the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost!

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, “Preaching Helps”

July 1, 2018

Pentecost 6/Lectionary 13

Lamentations 3:22–33

Psalm 30

2 Corinthians 8:7–15

Mark 5:21–43

Engaging the Texts

Today's gospel reading comes from the section of Mark that focuses on Jesus' preaching, teaching, and healing mission in and around Galilee. Immediately prior to this Sunday's stories we hear of Jesus healing the Gerasene demoniac, then stilling a storm that was about to swamp the boat in which he and his disciples were traveling.

One can read these stories together with today's stories of healing the hemorrhaging woman and raising Jairus' daughter as demonstrating the breadth of Jesus' healing power: curing a profound mental illness; interceding in natural disaster; curing a devastating physical ailment; and raising a dead child to life.

Today we might refer to these situations as traumatic occurrences in the lives of those who suffered and witnessed them. Traumas are overwhelming experiences that happen outside of one's ability to control them, and that threaten life, bodily integrity, or sanity. Trauma has the power to mire us in the muck of the past—stealing our sense of having a future and enveloping us in clouds of fear.

When he heals, Jesus does more than cure illness. Notably, Jesus lifts people out of their burdened pasts and restores to them the possibility of a future. For the hemorrhaging woman, twelve years of pain and ineffective but costly medical interventions have left her destitute and exhausted. Then in an instant, when she touches Jesus' clothing, she feels in her very body that a change for the good has taken place. Still, even though she received what she thought she came for, Jesus isn't content that she remain anonymous to him. He calls her out, not to chastise, but in order to hear her story, to validate her healing, and to name her "daughter." Jesus wants her to know that she did not steal something he wasn't willing to give; she needs to know that he sees her with the same love that burns in Jairus as he pleads for the life of his daughter. The woman needs not only the physical healing that she was able to gain through her own courageous reach, but also the restoration of her dignity, of her place in the family of humanity—a beloved, blessed daughter. That's how her future is most fully opened to her.

Meanwhile, the future for Jairus' daughter had closed entirely. When a child dies, often it is not only an ending of their future, but the future of a family and sometimes even

a larger community. Raising a child back to life is a vivid example of restoring the future because there is so much time to gain, and so many years of possibility that open up. All of this begins with an invitation to get up and an offer of something to eat—her new life nourished and nurtured by the family around her.

Pastoral Reflections

While today's reading from Lamentations confidently extols the faithfulness of God, the psalmist puts on our lips words of praise for God who "turns wailing into dancing" (or, still more vividly, changes "lament into whirling dance," as Eugene Peterson renders Psalm 30:11a in *The Message*). Yet how many more people in our neighborhoods and congregations have not witnessed the unceasing love of God? How many long to *experience* the transformation of mourning to joy? How many wait quietly for God's salvation in a world rife with injustice, in a society that doles out far worse than insults (Lam 3:30) to those judged to be unworthy because their/our bodies or desires, their/our politics or practices do not conform? Who in our communities has anguished twelve long years—hemorrhaging either literally or metaphorically? As we reflect on today's stories of restoration, may we remember not only those healed but others in the crowd who also follow along and reach out in faith, but have not yet been made whole.

Perhaps it is valuable also to ask ourselves what it was about Jesus that inspired trust from the suffering people who sought his help. How might their life experiences have shaped the ways in which they sought healing? Are those differences notable still today? Do our communities nurture a sense that some bodies "deserve" healing more than others? Are there some people whom we accuse of "stealing healing" today? According to today's stories, what might Jesus have to say about that?

Another approach asks us to consider ourselves as the body of Christ in the world today. We might notice who is being cut off now, and how we might work toward restoring to life and community those who are cut off. Maybe we think of ourselves as family to the one invited to get up (be raised to new life): is there an image for us as ones urged to nourish those whose lives are made new? Perhaps we will think differently about that task by considering the work of Louis Cozolino, a psychologist at Pepperdine, who challenges the "survival of the fittest" mentality when it comes to humans today, positing instead the survival of the *nurtured*. Those who are nurtured best survive best (see *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships*).

Kari Lipke and Joanne Engquist

July 8, 2018

Pentecost 7/Lectioary 14

Ezekiel 2:1–5

Psalm 123

2 Corinthians 12:2–10

Mark 6:1–13

Engaging the Texts

Throughout today's readings runs a thread concerning both the authority and limitations of those commissioned as witnesses. When Ezekiel is sent to "a rebellious house," the first thing God makes clear comes in how Ezekiel is addressed ("Mortal"), grounding the prophet's call in finitude, in limitation. Paul testifies to another's ecstatic experience "caught up in the third heaven," but for his part only *boasts* of his own weakness. Rejected by neighbors in Nazareth and doing almost no deeds of power in his hometown, Jesus' next move is to send out disciples *with* authority over unclean spirits but *without* nearly anything else for their journey.

Today's passage from Paul's letter to the unruly, contentious church at Corinth runs the risk of being quickly dismissed because of the descriptions of ecstasies from Paul's acquaintances who claim intense spiritual experiences (and thereby look down on those who have not been similarly set apart in the community). Easily enough hearers' responses swing between dismissive eye rolls and full-scale envy. Yet Paul boasts not in the extraordinary, but in that which is everyday, the completely commonplace: weakness. Vulnerability, Paul argues, is vital to the strength of those who serve Christ. Making personal his longing to be relieved of some "thorn in the flesh," Paul explains his sense of how it is that this "thorn" actually keeps him humble (or, at least as humble as Paul ever is!). A key word in the Greek is *uperairōmai* which implies arrogance by way of raising up oneself over another. Tied to the letter's larger message of reconciliation (not least between Paul and the Corinthians he loves, but more centrally between God and the creation God loves), it is essential that Paul's autobiographical notes routinely draw from this perspective of Paul's dependence on God's grace in all things. By extension, all who serve Christ are called to cherish vulnerability, remembering ourselves to be like earthen vessels which hold the extraordinary power of God (2 Cor 4:7).

The text in Mark similarly presses an examination of sufficiency, inviting renewed reflection on what extends and expands power and authority. The community that one expects to cherish Jesus is the one in which his deeds of power are limited. Does that experience inform Jesus' approach, which sends the disciples out in pairs but without the usual "baggage" of all that one might consider necessary and basic

(bread and bag and money in the belts!)? One might wonder also at the "normalizing" of situations in which one is not well received. Whether that is Jesus' hometown or the households where disciples go, the reality is named that not everyone or every place will be ready to receive the proclamation of the nearness of God's reign.

Pastoral Reflections

In returning to Jesus' hometown, to the site of what might be viewed as his "ordinary" life, the beginning of today's gospel opens us to more than the reproachful ways of the community in which he was raised. It offers an opportunity to see more broadly the mistake of judging the familiar as insignificant. Imagine how the story could have broadened had those neighbors let their knowledge of Jesus' everyday life, his full humanity, reshape their understanding of what God can do with the ordinary! But instead of letting that familiarity expand their wonder and deepen their relationship with a God who knows them and wants to know them even better, they write Jesus off.

Maybe that's a piece of why Jesus decides to send the disciples, two by two, carrying nothing that will communicate their distinct pasts and identities. Jesus makes them unfamiliar—travelers without baggage—so that their words and deeds may be comprehended freshly.

Singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer muses regularly on the power of what is familiar. Have a listen to her "Holy as a Day is Spent" (*Gathering of Spirits*) or consider these lines from her song "Geodes" (*The Geography of Light*):

All these things that we call familiar,
Are just miracles clothed in the commonplace
You'll see it if you try in the next stranger's eyes,
God walks around in muddy boots, sometimes rags
and that's the truth,
You can't always tell, but sometimes you just know...

With this in mind, maybe one part of the story of Jesus' return to Nazareth is pressing us to consider how and when we are like the hometown crowd dismissing what is ordinary and familiar. Do we see miracles "clothed in the commonplace"? Are there familiar characters in our daily lives who are bursting with beauty or profundity to share but **we** just don't see them? What judgments about who or what is special, and who or what is not, must we lay aside if we are to be open and humble enough to recognize, and be helped by, the sacred in the ordinary?

Another stand-out detail of the narrative is the disciples being sent in pairs. Sent on their journeys without all the belongings that are familiar—without the things that usually keep one safe or help one to be recognizable—the disciples are sent with the one thing that matters most: relationship. Nearly

all else is left behind (the bread, the bag, the money in the belts), but they are not sent alone. They are to be companions of one another—sent not only to speak with authority over unclean spirits, but sent in a partnership, to be in community. And, that being *in relationship*? It may well be the best model of the sacred in the ordinary, so let's embrace it fully.

Kari Lipke and Joanne Engquist

July 15, 2018 Pentecost 8/Lectionary 15

Amos 7:7–15

Psalm 85:8–13

Ephesians 1:3–14

Mark 6:14–29

Why don't we ever ask kids to act out this Gospel passage in Vacation Bible School? It's got drama, pathos, dancing! We act out Noah's Ark, although we do stop at the point where God kills everyone that's not in the boat. The children at our congregation love to act out the Good Samaritan, because the pastor gives them permission to "beat up and rob" their friend. Sure, it's playacting, but still...

This is a tragic story from a human perspective: mockery, infidelity, greed, cruelty. This is a tremendous story from a dramatic perspective: mockery, infidelity, greed, cruelty, sex, irony, full of twists and turns. It has all the parts of a *Telenovela* on *Univision*: a jealous lover, multiple levels of betrayal, a bunch of fat cats gorging themselves on the best food, jockeying for favor, and drooling with the host over his daughter's dance.

There was a telenovela a few years back called "Los Ricos También Lloran"—The Rich Also Cry. Maybe some of Herod's guests cried at the sight of the beheaded Baptist; maybe more of them laughed. They were the elite of Galilee—the courtiers, officers, and leaders. They probably didn't care much for a strange prophet from the margins who preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Gossip might have been a staple at Herod's banquets, but repentance was not—and his guests liked a good show, which Herod never failed to provide. Yet, I wonder: in the back of their minds, did they hear another strange prophet from the margins, who warned that "the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste"?

But back to the story. Is there any good news in a beheading? Professors at Christ Seminary-Seminex often said that "you can't get to the good news until you get to the bottom of the bad news." This one's a long, deep slog through human evil. Herod binds and arrests John, an act of capricious power. He does so because his new wife, Herodias, is jealous. Herod has entered into an unrighteous marriage with Herodias, pos-

sibly for geopolitical reasons as much as lust. John the Baptist condemns Herod, yet Herod "liked to listen to him." Even stranger, Herod knows that John was a righteous and holy man, and is afraid of him. Behind Herod's bravado and show of power, there is fear.

So, does Herod seek counsel for that fear? Does he struggle with what is eating him away inside? No, he defaults to the style that got him where he is: playing to the crowd in a grandiose manner. He throws a party for the political, military, and economic elite of Galilee. His daughter does one heck of a dance. (In Mark she is named Herodias and called "his daughter," in Matthew, she is simply "the daughter of Herodias.") Bombastic Herod promises her up to half the kingdom. She goes to her mother: "What should I ask for?" The head of John the Baptist. Cut it off, and we will be free! Echoes of killing Jesus to "save the nation."

But Herodias the Younger doesn't just ask for John's head, but for his head *on a platter*. A symbol of wealth, celebration, and finery becomes the bearer of terror. Plates are for one person to eat from; platters are to serve the crowd. Like her father, like the dance she enticed him with, she is playing to the crowd. She says to them: this head is for you. You are a part of this. Watch me dance now, with the fruits of *our* cruelty. Although she is in no way a prophet, she bears prophetic witness with the platter of John's head: this is not just who my cruel father is, this is who you all are.

Where in our land do we see finery and wealth bearing unspeakable cruelty? Who on the margins are sacrificed, not just for expediency, but to make those in power feel safe?

So how to preach hope out of this horrible story? Pastor Heidi Neumark spoke at our professional retreat last year, and talked about a Bible study at Transfiguration in the Bronx, where every woman had been the victim of some kind of abuse. She shared how she was reluctant to study the truly terrible passages about rape and abuse in the Hebrew Scriptures. But the women told her they wanted to study them, because it was *their* story. They could see themselves in the story, and they could see God in their own story, which helped them heal.

I think a lot of folks in our congregations have experienced humiliation and cruelty—maybe not a beheading of the body, but a beheading of their spirits.

So where *is* the good news? Is it too much of a stretch to state that John—like Jesus who he points to—is a sanctuary for truth, for God's grace? A sanctuary that will be laid waste by evil, as Amos foretold. The forerunner of Jesus, who is laid waste, tortured and lifted up for ridicule and abuse. And yet, that lifting up of Jesus, as Paul says, has given us "redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us." Ravished by evil, yet triumphing, lavishing us with grace.

Patrick Cabello Hansel

July 22, 2018

Pentecost 9/Lectionary 16

Jeremiah 23:1–6

Psalm 23

Ephesians 2:11–22

Mark 6:30–34, 53–56

Chapters five and six in Mark are a whirlwind of healing, feeding, casting out demons, and sending the disciples out to a myriad of communities. In the middle of that, Herod beheads John the Baptist, a direct result of Herod hearing about the work of Jesus and his ministry team. Now we dive right back into that work, a mission of crossing boundaries, healing, and teaching. God's mission is not going to be stopped by any ruler, any act of evil. Not even by death.

In these two passages of the Gospel, separated by the feeding of the 5,000, we see the cost of ministry to Jesus and the disciples: “For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” I imagine that most of us have had days or weeks like that. Too often I've skipped lunch or eaten at the computer while working—not good for my stomach, or the computer! I tell myself, and sometimes others, that I'm just “so busy.” But it is a choice I make, sometimes because circumstances require it; more often, because I see myself as indispensable. Which is, frankly, idolatry.

For many of our people, life is burdensome. My wife, Luisa, and I serve a congregation that is mostly immigrants from Latin America. Many of them do shift work, which can change by the week or even the day. Taking time off for a church retreat can mean losing 20 percent or more of their weekly pay. Still, they make sure their children are fed and healthy, go to their school conferences, serve through the church, worry about getting stopped by the police and being asked for their documents, and try to survive with hope, while hateful rhetoric about them swirls all around. That's tiring, to say the least.

Yet it seems that most of them are never too busy to eat! There is always food offered when I visit, and we are invited to every birthday feast. There is something that these immigrant folks know about the liberating power of eating: That sharing whatever you have blesses everyone, in abundance! But that's next week's sermon!

This week's texts are about restoring hope to a world that is scattered and oppressed. Jeremiah speaks God's condemnation to shepherds who were called to protect God's people. “It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them.” God doesn't lay the blame on lack of time or resources, or changing cultures and attitudes, or forces beyond our control. God lays the blame on the pastors, the shepherds! Ouch!

But there is hope. God says “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them...” Maybe part of our preaching this week can be a fervent prayer that God will raise up those shepherds in our midst, of all shapes and colors, and musical and culinary tastes.

In Ephesians, Paul points out our alienation: “remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” That last phrase hits me hard every time I read it: no hope, and no God *in the world*. Some days, with bombings of hospitals and schools, with migrants beaten and raped at the border, with transgender people murdered and safety nets shredded, it seems there is no hope, and that God has been pushed out of the world.

“But wait!” Paul says. “...in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” Oh God, grant this to a divided nation and a broken world!

But prayer is not our only duty. Jesus bids the disciples to come and rest, but when the crowd follows, “he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.” Note that in this passage, Jesus doesn't solve their problems; rather, he teaches them “many things.” I wish Mark would be a little more specific—what things, exactly? But maybe the teaching is hidden in Jesus' actions: seeking rest, having compassion, teaching the joys and challenges of the kingdom.

Maybe the teaching is also hidden in the crowd's actions. We know that crowds can turn into mobs. But here, the crowd does what believers do: they see, they follow, they recognize, they listen; and in the second half of the Gospel, they beg. They beg for healing.

Paul shows how that healing comes. It is by Christ's flesh, by which “he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” Not by an idea, not even by great teaching, but in his very body. Jesus goes right into the dividing wall, into the swamp of hostility. A clear reference to the cross, but also guidance to find Jesus. For throughout his ministry Jesus goes into poor neighborhoods, into houses of sinners, into the tombs where raging evil has destroyed flesh and spirit.

Jesus hangs on the cross for us, but he also hangs out with all of us, wherever we are.

Patrick Cabella Hansel

July 29, 2018

Pentecost 10/Lectionary 17

2 Kings 4:42–44

Psalm 145:10–18

Ephesians 3:14–21

John 6:1–21

My wife and I planted a congregation in north Philadelphia in the mid-nineties. We were completing our first summer of youth programming and were holding a graduation for the youth and their parents. We had not yet gathered enough people to prepare a meal for the feast, so we went to Freddy and Tony's, a neighborhood restaurant, on Wednesday before the graduation. We told them we were expecting about eighty people on Friday, and the person who took our order told us we would need two salads, two *arroz con gandules* (rice and pigeon peas) and two chickens. We placed the order and continued on with the preparation.

When we went to pick up the order, in the midst of the Friday dinner rush, the staff brought out two large containers of salad, two large containers of rice, and two chickens. Not two large containers of chicken, but two rather little roasted chickens! At that point, they were too busy to prepare more for us. We have never prayed that this gospel story would be manifested in our midst as we did that night! Somehow, everyone ate, as we asked God to multiply the little fowls. I don't think we had any leftovers.

I think most of our hearers have had these miracle experiences—maybe they didn't think of them as miracles, and maybe they didn't see their role in it. Maybe it wasn't as dramatic as feeding 5,000, or even 100. But most of our parishioners can point to happenings where the whole community was blessed through the community's trust of the Spirit of God. Blessed, even when it seems the resources were way too small. What might those have been?

In both of these feeding narratives, a person not named starts the process going. In 2 Kings, it is a man from Baal-shalishah, who brings barley loaves and fresh ears of grain. In John, it is a boy who offers his five loaves and two fish. In both cases, the offering is more than enough. Abundance reigns. In Elisha's case, "they ate and had some left." In Jesus' case, with "the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets." As a writer and a writing teacher, I always emphasize being specific as a way to carry truth and feeling. Kudos to John on the twelve baskets—and to the writer of 2 Kings for specifying twenty loaves of barley!

But seriously folks, perhaps we err if we present these two stories as Elisha and Jesus doing miracles. They do, to be sure; but God's power is working in the community as well. The unnamed boy and the man from Baal-shalishah take a risk

in the presence of the holy. They give what they have. They give *all* that they have, without strings. If the miracle doesn't occur, they probably don't get to eat, either—they have given up control of their possessions and turned them into gifts for the community.

Who are the unnoticed and maybe even unnamed people in our communities who give up control of their possessions (time, strength, wisdom) and turn them into gifts for the community?

Elisha does a lot of feeding and saving in chapter four. He multiplies the oil of a widow of one of his company of prophets, saving her sons from slavery. He purifies the cursed pot of stew at Gilgal. He also receives food gracefully from the Shunammite woman and raises her son from death. Then Elisha and his company are fed by a man from Baal-shalishah. (If I could rap, Baal-shalishah would be my refrain this Sunday!)

Elisha is known, but who starts the miracle? Even with famine in the land, the man from Baal-shalishah brings his first fruits to the Lord to feed God's servants. (According to the Talmud (Sanh. 12a) the fruits of the earth nowhere ripened so quickly as in Baal-shalishah.). In the midst of radical scarcity, the unnamed man practices radical abundance.

A faithful act in the face of despair.

Most of the great changes we celebrate today—and maybe take for granted—started small, and at great cost to the people—often "unnamed" who began them. Our daughters—a millennial and a Generation Whatever Comes Next—have grown up in neighborhoods with no majority ethnic group. They are light years ahead of many of us in their welcome and trust of LGBTQ people.

They learned about Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. and Harvey Milk in school. But I doubt they heard about the thousands who came before, who risked beatings, bombings, and death, to begin the movements that have brought change. People whose names we don't know. People who brought bread and gave it to the holy, gave it to the people.

I can't explain how these feeding miracles unfolded. I barely comprehend how the miracles of justice and freedom happened. But thanks be to God, with Paul I can say, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name."

Patrick Cabello Hansel

August 5, 2018

Pentecost 11/Lectionary 18

Exodus 16:2–4, 9–15

Psalm 78:23–29

Ephesians 4:1–6

John 6:24–35

Yet he commanded the skies above, and opened the doors of heaven,

He rained down on them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven.

Mortals ate of the bread of angels; he sent them food in abundance.

—*Psalm 78:23–25*

What's it?

“**W**hat's it?” wondered the band of newly liberated slaves, illegal aliens escaped from Egypt, now wanderers in the wilderness of Sinai. What is this stuff, this “fine, flakey substance, as fine as frost on the ground” that God had sent them in response to their incessant grumbling over the growling in their stomachs that led to the mutinous complaint against Moses and Aaron, their YHWH-appointed leaders? “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” And so YHWH sent quails in the evening and manna in the morning, which as Moses explained, “is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat (vv 13–15). “Manna,” as the “flakey substance” came to be called, simply takes its name from the Israelite's question, the word meaning literally “what's it?”

Truth to tell, as the Book of Numbers further explains, manna itself grew old fast to the tastes of these galloping gourmets (who knows what happened to the quails?), and we find the Israelites, in a passage we'll be hearing in a couple of months, complaining now of the unrelenting menu of manna. Here the yearning for the fleshpots of Egypt while beginning with the lament, “If we only had meat to eat!” expands to include: “We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic”—oh, the garlic!—“but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at” (11:4-6). That's gratitude for you, which goes to show that even such “bread from heaven,” as Jesus will call manna in today's Gospel reading, quickly can grow stale and taken-for-granted in the mouths of YHWH's fussy people. And YHWH can grow angry at the ingratitude and presumptuousness of the specially chosen people as well.

Jesus' discourse on the bread of life in John 6, which we'll be hearing read for the next four Sundays, begins with his accosting the crowd for pursuing him across the Sea of Galilee, not because of the “sign” he had performed in the feeding of the 5,000 but simply because “you ate your fill of the loaves,” as Jesus says. Or, as we saw last week, at the conclusion of the story of the miraculous feeding, satisfying empty stomachs was sufficient for the people to want to “take him by force to make him king”(vv 26, 15)—Herod's worst nightmare! No wonder that Jesus then turns the occasion of his recent feeding of the crowd into a teaching moment as he urges them, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” And then to their plea for a sign, Jesus offers the story of YHWH providing the people with manna in the wilderness—“bread from heaven to eat” (vv 27, 31) which he reminds them came not through Moses but from God, who now offers them “the true bread from heaven” which “gives life to the world.” To this they reply, “Sir, give us this bread always,” to which Jesus counters, sounding with his “I AM” more than a bit like YHWH from the burning bush, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.”

Here the people's chronically self-serving, ingratitude-inflected question “What's it?” becomes the sign, the occasion for Jesus' self-identification with the great “I AM” who is not only the world's creator but its continuing source of nurture and sustenance: the bread of life.

Taking it all a step further, our Ephesians text employs the Pauline metaphor of the body for the church (see Rom 12 and 1 Cor 12) which is fed and thrives by the nurturance of God's love given in Christ Jesus. Moreover it is a unitive nourishment that God provides freely that issues in the seven-fold oneness that is the crowning affirmation of Ephesians, which has justly been called “the epistle of Christian unity”: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all and through all and in all” (vv 16, 4). Get it? One-ness in Christ!

Suitable hymns abound including the contemporary “Bread of Life from Heaven” (*ELW* #474) set to a traditional Argentinian refrain with stanzas composed by Marty Haugen and words by Susan Briehl. This could be used as a hymn repeated throughout the next several weeks, or with verses added week by week. Or try “Lord, Who the Night You Were Betrayed” (*ELW* #463) whose refrain sings well the message of Ephesians, “may we all one bread, one body be, through this blest sacrament of unity.”

John Rollefson

August 12, 2018 Pentecost 12/Lectionary 19

1 Kings 19:4–8

Psalm 34:1–8

Ephesians 4:25–5:2

John 6:35, 41–51

O taste and see that the Lord is good

—*Psalm 34:8a*

Beyond Truthiness

Our month-long slog through the wordy bog of Jesus' Bread of Life discourse continues where we left off last week at v 35 with the first of what Archbishop William Temple once called "the seven parables of the Lord's Person," all introduced by the words "I am." These include in order of appearance: I am the Bread of Life (vi, 35); I am the Light of the World (vii, 12); I am the Door of the Sheep (x, 7); I am the Good Shepherd (x, 11); I am the Resurrection and the Life (xi, 25); I am the True Vine (xv, 1); and I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life (xiv,6).¹ I appreciate Temple's inference that the "I Am" sayings of Jesus pronounced egoistically constitute a kind of metaphorical alternative to Jesus' synoptic parables declared with riddling reference to the third person kingdom of heaven/God but in similarly sapiential style.

Now having claimed to be the bread of life which he offered in last week's verses as something far greater even than God's own manna in the days of the people's wanderings in the Sinai wilderness, Jesus deepens the perplexity of his hearers by claiming, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." That claim immediately sets them to wondering how this could be so: "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph whose father and mother we know?" It's a puzzle reminiscent of Jesus' encounter in Luke with his home town folks in Nazareth where he had been raised (Luke 4:22–23). They also assumed they knew all they needed to know about Jesus' origins.

In v 41 and following John begins to refer to Jesus' questioners as "the Jews" or in Greek "*oi Ioudaioi*." I have sometimes substituted "the Judeans" for "the Jews" to reduce the anti-Jewish sound of the language in John's gospel, taking care to explain my reasoning. Here the work of Raymond E. Brown on the Gospel and Epistles of John and the wider Johannine community is an important resource in helping to understand the origin of the anti-Jewish language in the Fourth Gospel. "The Jews" is a term used by John to describe that element of

life in the synagogue that opposed the Gospel about Jesus and made life difficult for the Johannine community of believers who had plenty of their own internal divisions.

The disputatious character of Jesus' discourse in John 6 is a reminder that there will always be a market in the church for the message of Ephesians we've been hearing, beginning with last week's paranesis regarding "speaking the truth in love" as a sign of the unitive gift of the Spirit. Today we hear "putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors," which involves "let(ting) no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up" as well as "put(ting) away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice," instead "be(ing) kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (4:15a, 25, 29, 31–32).

Amid a time in our nation when evidence of "truth-telling" is rare in our public life (especially sadly in self-described "evangelical" circles that belie the true meaning of the word) and "truthiness," as Stephen Colbert has termed public phony-ness, is epidemic, it is reassuring to hear Jesus himself, amid his dispute, underline his own commitment to the truth with the interjection, "Amen. Amen" (v 47a). "Verily, Verily," the *AV* used to translate this which our *NRSV* has updated to "very truly." It's Jesus' way of marking his words with a special kind of divine veracity similar perhaps, to the commonly found Old Testament prophets' truth-establishing phrase "thus says the Lord."

In the very closing verse of our lection, we find Jesus reiterating his by now familiar declaration with the only slightly amended: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven," adding the implication that he will expand on in next week's text, "Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (v 51). As we'll be seeing, this serves to raise the temperature and tempers of Jesus' opponents but also opens a further dimension of his discourse, which some have termed "eucharistic." Robert Smith sees it as a "jarring" transition in which Jesus moves from claiming for himself what might have been interpreted as being a kind of "nurturing" presence as the "bearer of divine wisdom" to a much fleshier and eventually bloodier claim of being our risen and wounded Lord, who is "bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh."²

John Rollefson

1. William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse Barlow, 1985) 76.

2. Robert Smith, *Wounded Lord*, (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 70–71.

August 19, 2018

Pentecost 13/Lectionary 20

Proverbs 9:1–6

Psalms 34:9–14

Ephesians 5:15–20

John 6:51–58

Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the
fear of the Lord.

—*Psalms 34:11*

Wisdom's Feast

This Sunday offers a rare opportunity to let the wisdom tradition within scripture take the lead as we hear the lovely lection from Proverbs 9 that is sometimes called “Wisdom’s Feast.” It allows us to hear the readings from Ephesians and John as well as our psalmody with ears especially attuned to how the Word for today is being played in the key of wisdom, that minor strain of biblical literature that is chiefly thought of in terms of writings like Proverbs, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Job. But wisdom is also at home in the New Testament in places like James, Ephesians, Colossians, and the Gospel of John where Jesus is portrayed as the great teacher or rabbi whom we find declaring today, cryptically enough, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. . . .” (v 51a). Rather than by means of “signs” as in John, the synoptic gospels also portray Jesus as one who teaches by means of riddling parables, using the most common, everyday things of life to evoke the secret of the kingdom of heaven/God.³

Wisdom, from a biblical perspective, is the fruit of reflection upon human experience in the light of God’s living Word—and so it is not a human accomplishment but is the gift of God’s Spirit. Today’s reading from Ephesians contains a good example of the “paranetic,” advice-giving character of the wisdom tradition: “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish (the antonym of wise) but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery but be filled with the Spirit” (vv 15–18)—the discerning Spirit of God’s wisdom. Wisdom is good advice raised to a higher degree, uncommonly good because godly sense.

One of the intriguing aspects of the figure of Wisdom in scripture is that wisdom is not only a feminine noun but is

3. For a biblical theology especially attuned to the wisdom tradition within scripture see Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978).

portrayed as a woman—even as God’s “consort” or “darling child” in a passage like Proverbs 8 in which Wisdom is “at once the delight of the creator and the companion of human beings” while also being “a member of the family of God,” as Terrien puts it. The prologue to John’s gospel sounds like a wisdom hymn to the eternal Word with echoes of Proverbs’ reference to the preexistent Wisdom, “begotten not made.”⁴

In today’s brief reading from Proverbs 9, Wisdom is an enthusiastic hostess who has carefully set her table, planned and prepared her multi-course meal, chosen and decanted her wine all in readiness to welcome guests to her table. Who are the guests? She delegates the task of figuring this out to her servant girls who are sent into the town with the open invitation, “You that are simple, turn in here!” and to those “without sense” she beckons, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight” (vv 3–6). It is a metaphor, an image, after all, that Proverbs is offering us that we too—simple and without sense as we may be—are especially welcomed to Wisdom’s feast.

Christians cannot hear of Wisdom’s feast without thinking of Jesus, his characteristic table fellowship with the religiously excluded, his feeding of the 5,000, his parable of the great banquet/wedding feast, and his final meal with his friends, which the church would commemorate ever after at Jesus’ command. Around the table we trust Jesus’ words—as in today’s Gospel reading—that in this simple meal of bread and wine, a true eating and drinking of Jesus’ own flesh and blood is being experienced in which the original host himself becomes the meal—the living bread come down from heaven. It is not hard to imagine that Proverbs 9 may well have been one of Jesus’ favorite passages from his people’s scriptures.⁵

“Turn in here”—Wisdom’s invitation to her banquet—might be taken up by the church as our invitation to others to “come and see” what it is that is on offer here. And thanks to Ephesians we’re promised that this matter of being filled with the Spirit of wisdom has certain other outcomes as well as feasting on the bread of life, one of which is music, or if you will, participatory song. “Be filled with the Spirit,” our lection closes, “as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (vv 18b–20). Now that’s true “eucharist” in its original meaning of “thanksgiving.” Try the newish hymn “We Eat the Bread

4. *Ibid.*, 356–357. See also Terrien’s *Till the Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 88 ff.

5. On the importance of philoxenia, usually translated as “hospitality” to the ministry of Jesus see John Koenig’s important study, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

of Teaching” (*ELW* #518), which sings of how “Wisdom calls throughout the city,/knows our hunger, and in pity/gives her loving invitation/to the banquet of salvation.”

John Rollefson

August 26, 2018 Pentecost 14/Lectionary 21

Joshua 24:1–2a, 14–18

Psalm 34:15–22

Ephesians 6:10–20

John 6:56–69

The Lord is near to the broken-hearted, and saves the
crushed in spirit...

The Lord redeems the life of his servants...

—*Psalm 34:18, 22a*

“Do You Also Wish to Go Away?”

For five weeks now we’ve been working our way through the sixth chapter of John that consists largely of Jesus’ l-o-n-g soliloquy on what it means for him to claim “*I am the bread of life*.” Today Jesus ends his sermon—as all sermons must finally end—and it’s at least reassuring to us preacher-types that even Jesus’ sermons didn’t always receive a polite and positive hearing.

In fact, John reports, “When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’” (v 60). The Greek word translated as “difficult” is “*skleros*”—like “sclerosis” in English—but in Greek it can also mean “dry” as well as “hard.” Its connotations also include, my lexicon tells me, “harsh” or “rough,” “stiff” or “stark,” “austere” or “stern.” “Too tough to swallow,” I’d translate it. The *NRSV*’s “difficult” is just too wishy-washy. “A rough, crude teaching. Who wants to hear that?” I imagine his disciples saying. Please notice that it’s Jesus’ own disciples—not the crowd, nor “the Jews”—but his own followers and friends who find his teaching about the bread of life, and especially about the need for them to “eat my flesh and drink my blood” (v 56) too hard to swallow (forgive the pun). I still recall years ago an older, much respected pastor objecting to words he found too graphic in the refrain of what was then a contemporary hymn, “Eat my body, drink my blood.” The words still have the power to offend the faithful.

But Jesus, being a good teacher, asks his disciples—I like to think with a slight smile creasing his face—“Does this offend you?” Again, a weak translation, for the Greek literally says, “Does this scandalize you? Do you find this a stumbling

block?” Indeed it must have, for John tells us that “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” This matter of eating his flesh and drinking his blood apparently was the straw that broke the camel’s back for some who had counted themselves among his followers. So Jesus turned to the twelve, the inner circle among his disciples, and asks them with what one commentator calls “unsettling directness”: “Do you also wish to go away?”

I imagine Jesus asking the question sadly, sighing as his shoulders sagged a little, as he saw one-time followers in whom he’d invested a great deal of himself shaking their heads in disbelief or dissatisfaction or whatever it is that disillusion folks who’d once shown excitement and commitment. I’ve seen it in church members who get mad or frustrated about something or someone and threaten to leave, or just stop coming and won’t even make the effort to explain why. Jesus’ question, “So you also want to go away?” makes him sound almost pathetic, doesn’t it?

But, to be honest, there are times when I myself have been tempted to answer “Yep” to Jesus’ question. Yep, I’ve had it with this church business—enough prejudice, enough injustice, enough hard-headedness, enough stinginess, enough guilt over my own inadequacies or mistakes, enough seemingly endless church meetings—like when our Synod Assembly couldn’t even manage to pass a resolution against torture!

“Do you also wish to go away?” Jesus asks. But the question isn’t one he invented. It really goes back to Adam and Eve in the garden and, as Jesus himself suggests in John 6, is epitomized in Israel’s wilderness wanderings only made possible by YHWH’s life-sustaining gift of manna—about which the Israelites incessantly complained—culminating in today’s climactic story from the book of Joshua. “Choose this day whom you will serve,” Joshua urges the people at a critical juncture in their history, but “as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (v 15). “You gotta’ serve somebody,” Bob Dylan taught us to sing during his brief evangelical phase. “It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you gotta’ serve somebody.” But Israel’s well-meaning if sanctimonious opting for YHWH, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods” (v 16), once again reveals that our human choosing is never the final word, however good the intentions. Only God’s choosing to remain loyal to the covenant promises is finally what matters, hard as the prophets will try to remind Israel and us of our covenantal responsibilities.

Should we be surprised that it’s Simon Peter who steps forward to answer Jesus’ question, “Do you also wish to go away?” with words we join him in singing weekly as our Gospel acclamation, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. . . .” (v 68).

As our reading from Ephesians reminds us, “our struggle

is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places” (v 12).

“I Am the Bread of Life” (*ELW* #485) is one of very few communion hymns to sing directly of our eating of Christ’s flesh and drinking of his blood in a close paraphrase of today’s Gospel text.

John Rollefson

September 2, 2018 Pentecost 15/Lectionary 22

Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–9

Psalm 15

James 1:17–27

Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

Engaging the Texts

Psalm 15 is considered a liturgical psalm and functions as an entrance liturgy, or what we might refer to as a Call to Worship. It begins with a question that asks who is worthy of worship. This sounds a bit like a litmus test or approval for entrance. The psalm continues with a list of ethical actions and behaviors the best of us could not attain. At the end of the psalm we are left with the impossibility of reaching a state of security: “Whoever does these things will always be secure.”

This psalm doesn’t square with our Lutheran bent toward grace, radical welcome, and being a mash up of saint and sinner all at the same time. Perhaps the invitation is to find our security in God who is true, keeps promises, does justice, and can be counted on. We are to be reflections of what God mirrors for us.

This Sunday offers a wonderful opportunity to see this psalm as part of the liturgy. Rearrange the words to be read responsively. Begin with an opening question and welcome, followed by confession and forgiveness. Be creative. Include the psalmist’s text in the closing blessing. Though this psalm functions as an entrance to worship, it refers to our lives and actions in the world. Psalm 15 reminds us the walls of the sanctuary are porous; there should be little obstruction between worship and the world. We exit to serve.

Here’s an example:

Lord, who may enter your sanctuary; who may worship you?

Those who are upright in word and deed, those who do and obey the will of God.

Loving God, we come before you, confessing the ways we are ill-prepared to worship you.

When we don’t do what is right,

God forgive us.

When the words we speak are untrue or insincere, when we lie about others,

God forgive us.

When we do wrong to our friends, when we spread rumors about our neighbors,

God forgive us.

When we have not honored those who live out their faith,

God forgive us.

When we have failed to help those in need, when we have not acted for justice, when we have not shared our resources, which come from you,

God forgive us.

God intends for us to find our security and hope in God, and yearns for us to care for our neighbor. You are forgiven and loved. In Christ you are saved and made whole. Every day is a new beginning, a new opportunity to practice our faith active in love.

Amen.

Benediction

Go in peace, into the world God so loves

Be truthful in word and deed

Be kind toward your neighbor

Give of yourself and your treasure with an abundant heart

May the God of all grace, strengthen and guide you all your days.

Amen

Pastoral Reflections

There are people who are just plain good with words. Poets express the contours of human existence. Prophets inspire hope for the disenfranchised. Storytellers move listeners and reveal universal truths. Philosophers ask probing questions and provide sophisticated answers. Children blurt out the truth, like the three-year-old leaving communion after receiving a blessing, “Why don’t I get to have Jesus?” Songwriters with their lyrics store the treasures of faith.

Words inspire. Words change the world. Words destroy and hurt. Words create chasms. Words lead to war. For most

of us even our best efforts with words can fall flat. We are afraid of saying the wrong thing when someone is grieving; we withhold a truth when it feels too risky. We avoid being honest and speak sideways.

Martin Luther did not like the words found in the book of James. Verses such as: “*Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves,*” drove him up a wall. Luther wished the short book stricken from the canon.

Yet, the little book of James is still here. (Luther didn’t have the last word!) Today’s texts are about living faith with integrity—matching words with actions, aligning our hearts to God’s heart where justice and compassion are organic expressions of faith, where one’s faith and beliefs are consonant with one’s actions.

Today’s texts encourage Christians to walk the walk we talk, to keep at the heart of our values the laws of God, to be doers of the word, not merely hearers. There is no such thing as personal religion. Religion, the life of faith, is necessarily public; its purpose is to care for orphans and widows in their distress. These texts call us to come out of our quiet faith closets and let the light of Christ shine, in full view, in word and deed.

In Mark we find a frustrated Jesus who sees others so caught up in proper rituals and rules that the heart of God is forgotten. Jesus turns the purity system with its abrasive social boundaries on its head and offers a radically different social vision.

We are Christians in the making, in need of practice. We gather and worship, not because *we* are faithful, but because God is faithful to us. God takes the stuff of our lives, the good and the evil, the unevenness of it all, gathers it up, and places it in God’s grace-filled hands. God does not give up on us, on the world, on the church. God is faithful and persistent. God’s words are true. God’s heart is overflowing with compassion for each of us.

Mary Halvorson

September 9, 2018 Pentecost 16/Lectionary 23

Isaiah 35:4–7a

Psalms 146

James 2:1–10, (11–13), 14–17

Mark 7:24–37

Engaging the Texts

James challenges us with the question, how can you hold forth faith in Christ and behave in a way that discriminates against others? “It’s quite easy,” is the uncomfortable answer.

We do it all the time. The writer of James is concerned with Christian conduct and living. This letter is a manual for how to live the life of faith—practical, specific, challenging. It is concerned not with proper beliefs, but with proper living that goes hand-in-hand with faith in the God known in Christ.

The Syrophenician woman in Mark takes a huge leap and publically challenges Jesus into a widened understanding of God’s realm. She pushes, challenges, and ultimately teaches him that a Gentile foreigner can be invited to the table. She is worthy of breadcrumbs and more; she is included in God’s circle of grace. The ripples of God’s love are always stretching us to go further, to risk more, to err on the side of love. It’s all undergirded with God’s grace, which is the starting line, which is the finishing point.

Just after this story, Jesus heals a deaf man then follows with the feeding of the four thousand. At this meal no food was withheld, no one went hungry, no one had to beg for crumbs; there were even leftovers to take home in Ziploc bags. Interesting. Makes me think the Syrophenician woman was one of those mentors in the faith we find in our congregations. Their witness and persistence make us better pastors and preachers. They push us into spiritual and sometimes painful growth, and unleash in us deepened compassion. They hold us accountable to what we preach, to what Jesus would have us do and be.

The woman of Tyre had nothing to lose; she was already at the bottom of the social rung, and everything to lose in the death of her daughter. As a fierce mother she had faith in what Jesus could provide for her daughter. She would not give up until he was true to his calling. Jesus is busted by her faith and responds with healing. And this made him a better Jesus.

Years ago when I preached on this text I did a crazy thing. I had Ziploc bags, each one holding a chunk of a bagel. I punctuated my sermon with ... “and even the _____ deserve crumbs.” Then I threw bags into the congregation and people caught them. One hit the ceiling and fell onto the lap of a gracious ninety-year-old.

Pastoral Reflections

The novel *March* by Geraldine Brooks is a portrayal of the Civil War. The protagonist is a father of three daughters who volunteers as a military chaplain. As a young man he peddles books in Virginia. As he meanders through a small town, he notices a Bible study going on and joins in. The little clapboard church stands next to a courtyard where slaves are put up for auction. It just so happens a sale is taking place. As he sits in the church Mr. March hears with one ear the good news, and with the other ear, the resonant voice of the auctioneer starting the bidding process for two slaves. As the Bible studiers contemplate the teachings of Jesus, the voice

outside is selling two children who had been torn from their mother and are standing terrified on the auction block. His thoughts fly to the verse, “Suffer the little children to come unto me.” Had he the means, he would have marched out and bought those children their freedom.

What is most striking to this young man who had not yet entered seminary, was no one else in the church seemed to notice what was going on outside. When the pastor asks for money to send Bibles to Africa, the young man can bear it no longer. “How it is the Good News is not sent more cheaply to the young children on the auction block next door?” He is greeted with hisses and a cold request that he leave, which he does, with no regret.

The idea of a Bible study taking place while children stand on the auction block to be sold sounds preposterous. We would never allow this to happen in our time. We’ve surely evolved beyond auction blocks and separating mothers from their children, haven’t we? We would have stood up and stopped the madness and saved the children. We would not show partiality and welcome the rich, smartly dressed, non-immigrant person into our sanctuaries—while leaving out the dirty, troubled, poor souls. Sarcasm aside, keeping my faith congruent with my actions is a daily struggle and tension. Every day I fail, every day I miss, omit, or avoid an opportunity. Just how are we to live out our faith in light of the real-life auction blocks outside the church windows?

One thing is sure: we need to claim and confess a searing kind of honesty. I’m part of the problem that allows the auction blocks of our time to continue. We all come as beggars to the table in need of God’s grace.

William Sloane Coffin describes God’s love: it is poured out universally on everyone from the pope to the loneliest wino on the planet; and secondly God’s love doesn’t seek value, it creates value. It’s not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value.

Mary Halvorson

September 16, 2018 Pentecost 17/Lectionary 24

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalms 116:1–9

James 3:1–12

Mark 8:27–38

Engaging the Texts

For many congregations, September heralds the return of confirmation classes, Sunday school, adult enrichment programs, and intergenerational education. It is fitting then

that this week’s texts focus on the power, joy, and perils of teaching. While we often think of teaching as helping others learn about God, these texts reframe teaching as the proclamation of who God is for you. Our teaching is never about God in general but about who God has decided to be for us in Jesus Christ.

Our Isaiah text views teaching as a prophetic act. God has given the author the ability to teach in order to sustain the weary with a word. Good teachers don’t just impart information; they change how we view ourselves and what we think is possible in the world. Our ordinary acts of teaching and consolation can be conduits of the extraordinary mercy of God. But as the author knew well, teaching that instills hope or promises change is always met with resistance.

While teaching comes with great potential, it also comes with equally heavy responsibilities. The vivid imagery of the James text shows how seemingly minor changes in teaching can lead to dramatic changes over time. Consider, for example, how many of our most deeply entrenched ideas about God were the first things we were taught about God. James also notes that our teaching about God needs to be aligned with our practices toward others. Poor teaching and praxis can lead people away from the mercy of God, but good teaching can also create faith in the promises of God. Faced with those alternatives, what choice do we have but to bless God, trust the Spirit, and teach boldly?

Mark’s take on teaching is embedded not only in the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples but also in the setting of their discussion. Caesarea Philippi was a hub of trade, cultural capital, and pagan religious practices. When Peter rebukes Jesus’ teaching about his coming death, it is this worldview that Peter is trying to hold on to. Peter wants a Jesus who conquers, not a Jesus who is crucified. But despite Jesus’ infamous rebuke of Peter’s desire, Peter is not cut out of Jesus’ care. In Mark’s Easter gospel, Peter is even explicitly named as someone who needs to be told about Jesus’ resurrection. Faith formation is a lifelong process, full of stops and starts, joys and struggles. Even when we struggle to catch up to where God is calling us, God keeps on calling us by name.

Pastoral Reflections

The idea that faith is something people can pick up on their own is deeply embedded in our language. In Kenda Creasy Dean’s book *Almost Christian*, she notes that we “teach” young people *baseball*, but we “*expose*” them to faith.⁶ Likewise, we often assume that faith is a private matter that emerges from within us. But faith is something that emerges

6. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15.

from encounter both with the scriptural witness and a community of support.

Growing in faith is not always easy. In Mark's text, Jesus teaches Peter about his mission and purpose by rejecting his desire for a messiah who takes power over others. Jesus even makes a point of getting his disciples' attention before he rebukes Peter. A sermon could explore how we grow in faith not just by learning more but by leaving some of our ideas behind. This is the far more difficult part of learning. It's easy to learn new facts and bits of trivia, but it's far more difficult to admit that an idea you had about God or the church was misguided. And yet, Mark suggests, sometimes we need to have our ideas about God rebuked. What ideas, practices, and assumptions do we need to have rebuked? When was the last time you changed your mind about God? How do we rebuke pastorally?

Another sermon might focus on the nature of Peter's desire for a messiah who is revealed in glory instead of on a cross. Peter wants a messiah who is revealed in the corridors of influence in Caesarea Philippi instead of a cross on Golgotha. What Jesus rejects is Peter's suggestion that Jesus take on the powers that be by their own methods. Peter is so startled by Jesus' talk about his death that he doesn't even hear the promise of resurrection Jesus proclaims. Our worldview is so constrained by the reality of death that we, like Peter, need to be taught to listen for the promise of resurrection.

The Isaiah text suggests that teaching will often be met with resistance. Luther's own life provides one well-known example of how teaching that challenges authority is met with opposition. Or consider the Highlander Folk School, which trained Rosa Parks and many other activists during the civil rights movement. Highlander was an intellectual catalyst of the movement and one of the few places in the south where integrated meetings were held. After being smeared in the press, the school was closed by the state of Tennessee in 1961. The Isaiah text invites us not only to teach truthfully, but also to pray that God would open our ears so that we can engage in the task of prophetic listening.

Joseph Shattauer-Paille

September 23, 2018 Pentecost 18/Lectioary 25

Jeremiah 11:18–20

Psalm 54

James 3:13—4:3, 7–8a

Mark 9:30–37

Engaging the Texts

This week's texts are full of drama. We hear a desperate plea for help, a rousing admonition for obedience, and an obnoxious argument among the disciples. But beneath the varied surface of all our readings is a concern for what it means to be obedient and what it means to have power.

The reading from Jeremiah is a lament and a petition for God's aid. Jeremiah's call for repentance, no surprise, has not been heeded. Even worse, the residents of Anathoth, his hometown, have set out to kill him. Jeremiah is not a self-appointed messenger—the message he carries is not of his own making. Since God commissioned Jeremiah for this prophetic task, Jeremiah expects that God will carry him through it. The vivid language of the lamb suggests this includes physical protection, but it also means being declared righteous by God in the presence of Jeremiah's persecutors.

It is easy to imagine Jeremiah making an exhortation much like that in this week's James text. The reading begins with a challenge to those who consider themselves wise and understanding. Many of us associate wisdom with perceptiveness or discernment. But for James, the true sign of wisdom is gentleness. The wisdom of the world, he suggests, is ultimately selfish and coercive, while the wisdom of God is peaceable and willing to yield. When we seek to get an edge on others, we create cycles of destruction. But by seeking peace, James claims, we reap a "harvest of righteousness" (v 18). The exhortation culminates with an admonition to resist the devil by submitting to God. Wisdom may be exhibited as gentleness, but it is built on trust in God's mercy.

It is that kind of wisdom that the disciples in Mark's gospel are not exhibiting. They fail to understand Jesus' prediction of his death and are too afraid to ask, yet still argue about who is the greatest disciple. Jesus responds to their hubris not by chiding them but by explaining that the greatest is the one who serves the least. The child is significant because children had little social standing and were entirely dependent on others. The ones who are the greatest, Jesus suggests, are those who welcome and stand alongside those who are considered the least. In his correction of the disciples' misguided argument, Jesus also offers a way to understand the meaning of his passion. By dying alongside those who are considered the least, the magnitude of God's solidarity with us and compassion for us are revealed.

Pastoral Reflections

Today's Gospel text is too often used as a proof-text to justify kids' full participation in the liturgical life of the congregation. While well-intentioned, such a reading strips away much of the text's original meaning and robs it of much of its power. The child is important as an example of someone with no real status in society. While the disciples argue over who has the most status, Jesus shows us that his mission is oriented toward those with the least.

This may be a story that we have to tell differently. I serve a congregation in suburban New Jersey where it is hard to overstate the status that kids have. Many people in our community have rearranged their lives around their kids' interests, an idea that would have struck the disciples as bizarre. In our context, it is often people who have chosen not to have children, people who cannot have children, and people who live alone who have the least status. Who are the people in your context who are the easiest to ignore? It is these people and those who welcome them whom Jesus considers to be the greatest.

While status and power are not mentioned in our text from James, it is hard to read the text without thinking about them. As a result, contemporary readers will likely have mixed feelings about James' exhortation. On the one hand, many of us spend a great deal of time seeking wisdom from friends, elders, and mentors. For James to suggest that wisdom is "peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, [and] full of good fruits" will resonate with many (v 17). Yet we may recoil from his admonition to "submit yourselves" to God (v 7). Many of us find the language of "submission" misguided, unhelpful, or even harmful. Countless women have been counseled to submit to their abusive husbands. Many people have submitted to regressive church teachings or coercive leaders. Our desire for agency and autonomy seems to stand in sharp contradiction to submission. Can the language of submission be redeemed or does it need to be pruned out of our vocabulary?

The Jeremiah text may offer a way out of the impasse. Jeremiah is also dealing with the problem of submission but within the frame of Israel and Judah's covenant with God. In that covenant, submission does not take away agency and autonomy but leads to the proper use of it. The people's refusal to submit to the covenant has not improved their situation but has created rampant inequality and injustice. Jeremiah's plea for help is not just for his own safety but also so that his message might be heard and the people would return to their covenant with God. Paired with Jeremiah's call to obedience is a promise that within the covenant is the restoration of personal agency and communal flourishing.

Joseph Shattauer Paille

September 30, 2018 Pentecost 19/Lectionary 26

Numbers 11:4–6, 10–16, 24–29

Psalm 19:7–14

James 5:13–20

Mark 9:38–50

The name of the book of Numbers in Hebrew is "In the Wilderness." The book narrates the time between liberation and arrival in the promised land. The people are "on the way" to their destination. Daniel Erlander has labeled this time as "the wilderness school."⁷ The people are practicing what it's like to be a people of faith, which always sounds better in theory than it does when it must be lived in community.

It's only been three days since the people left Mount Sinai. Already there is a "rabble" who actively stir up the people's discontent. Moses is overwhelmed by the challenge and is ready quit. Leadership in the covenant community is hard. Sometimes it's tough to believe that a loving God can call good people into a ministry that's so exasperating. Perhaps Moses would have benefited from Clinical Pastoral Education. He's taken on too much. He assumes that God's work is his work and that he's responsible for the people's happiness.

The solution, of course, is to share and distribute the responsibility, the challenge, and the power of leadership. This is part of what the covenant community begins to learn in the wilderness. God's people are not to be led only by one charismatic leader but by many, all of whose names we don't even learn. This theme is played out both in the Gospel text and in the reading from James, where leadership is assumed to be communal, collaborative, and relational.

This is underscored as the story in Numbers progresses. The seventy are gathered at the center of the camp where holiness is constellated. They are given a portion of Moses' Spirit, yet this power is immediately misunderstood as a privilege, something to be controlled and protected. As it turns out, there are two poetic prophets with rhyming names who get the same Spirit even though they are outside the boundaries of holiness. Eldad and Medad, located among the people, perhaps even near the rabble, get the Spirit, too.

This bothers Joshua and his seventy comrades. They demand that this power from the edges and boundaries, be silenced. Yet Moses now takes his place as the extraordinary leader, wishing out loud that all God's people might be filled with prophetic and spiritual power.

7. Daniel Erlander, *Manna and Mercy: A Brief History of God's Unfolding Promise to Mend the Entire Universe* (The Order of Saints Martin and Teresa, Mercer Island, Washington, 1972), 7.

This is also the issue in the Gospel text in Mark. The disciples are disturbed that someone else is doing the work of God's commonwealth. All along the disciples had been looking for a way to make themselves great. The reader of the Gospel should give their best whine when reading verse 38. Doesn't being with Jesus make us entitled to be special? Doesn't being a follower of Jesus set us apart from the rabble, the ones who don't have our insider-y wisdom? Both Jesus and Moses are willing to recognize God's work in whoever embodies it. They see the commonwealth of God as something wider, larger, and more productive than even they can see.

The reading from James trains our eyes on where to look: where there is cheerfulness, hope, concern for the suffering, healing, forgiveness, prayer, and a commitment to reconciliation. This may be an important message for our interfaith, multicultural, multiethnic world: God's project of mercy, love, justice, and compassion is already at work in more complex and effective ways than even the God-chosen institutions can manage. God's prophetic and spiritual power runs both *within* the structured arrangements for leadership and *outside* its boundaries. The church would be wise to recognize both these dynamics, trusting that faithfulness comes as they are held together.

Without this wider lens, power becomes privileged entitlement that will most inevitably be a stumbling block, both for those who have it and those who don't. Unrecognized privilege may well be the millstone around the neck of the church, at least the white church. Certainly, it is the stumbling block that has caused many "little ones" to experience suffering, rejection, pain, and injustice.

For those with privilege, this is hard work. When you've been at the center or near enough to the top to believe you deserve it, there's loss in discovering that faithfulness inevitably means leaving something behind, even becoming disabled for the sake of the gospel. Cutting off those things that give us a leg up feels like a kind of amputation. It feels like entering life only half-able to participate. Yet, this is precisely what the economic, political, and cultural systems do to many already.

Mark seems to be suggesting that listening to voices outside the established boundaries or being willing see God's work happening around us is exactly how we begin to avoid becoming arrogant, privileged stumbling stones. This is part of our work "on the way" to Jerusalem or the promised land or anywhere the church is headed. The only way that we stop being stumbling blocks is to listen to the people who are drowning under the weight of oppression, violence, inequality, and political structures that give power to some and not to others; nations or communities that operate with the same arrogant standards as the fearful seventy or the grandiose twelve. Oh, that all people could prophesy with that vision!

Bradley Schmeling

October 7, 2018 Pentecost 20/Lectionary 27

Genesis 2:18–24

Psalm 8

Hebrews 1:1–4, 2:5–12

Mark 10:2–16

Walter Brueggemann gives a summary of Genesis 2:18–24 that may well serve as a guide for the exploration of today's texts. "The place of the garden is for this covenanted human community of solidarity, trust, and well-being."⁸ These texts suffer if patriarchal frameworks shape their interpretations. The preacher may have to decide whether they can finally be recovered for a gospel sermon. Can they be embraced or must they, for the sake of the gospel, be rejected? In the end, they must lead us to "solidarity, trust, and well-being."

Genesis 2 is part of the second creation story, the older narrative, that feels as if it has been told for generations around the fire. Adam sits in the garden presented with each animal. "Will this one work?" God asks. None of them, porcupines or penguins, quite provide what this earth-creature needs. Yet, he names them, not as a way of establishing dominance, as naming often can, but as a way of entering relationship with them. Although they don't "fit," they are part of the circle of relations that make this garden home and keep Adam human. Eve, the new creation, who stands on her own, is the wonderful conclusion to the story. They are, at last, bone of bone and flesh of their flesh. They are alike. Now they are human.

A friend once gave me advice about finding a husband, "If he makes you grow into your higher and better self, then he is that one." This is no Disney text, but if it were, at verse 25 the animals would sing an Oscar-winning song and the hippos would start to dance around them. Of course, there is danger surrounding them, and all will soon not go well. But these verses may be best understood if we can capture the wonder of these two beautiful creations, fully alive as part of the circle of life. Let's be clear, too, that the wonder of this text is not limited to Adam and Eve, or even Adam and Steve. This story points us to the deep delight and the astonishing power of human relationships, sexual or otherwise, gendered or non-gendered. We all yearn to live our lives in a community that is bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh. We long to be fully human.

My friend, who gave me the advice about a husband, forgot to tell me that he would also bring out the very worst. How often we discover that our relationships, which once held so much promise, become broken. Marriage ends in divorce.

8. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982), 47.

Friendships break. Communities and families are torn apart by division and prejudice. As Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem in Mark, he gives witness to the radical ethic of God's commonwealth. It's important to note that the Pharisees are not exploring marriage as a place of blessing and pain. They are not interested in how the commonwealth of God might give shape to marriages that are breaking. They are only interested in trapping Jesus. They have already set out to destroy him. Since they are not interested in the real reasons for divorce, it's important for us not to take a new rule about divorce from this exchange. It's also not an argument that can be used as a bumper sticker in the culture wars of the twenty-first century to preclude gay marriage. If anything, Jesus is saying, "Of course, human beings were made for relationship, but you're missing the whole point." The problem of marriage and divorce is not settled by an exploration of the rules.

Jesus does engage the question in interesting ways. He grants women the same right as men when it comes to divorce. What strikes me as unique is that he takes seriously the spouse who is left behind. He recognizes that what is new for one is a betrayal for another. He considers the most vulnerable one in this new triad. We may not be able to make a new rule about marriage and re-marriage from this text, but perhaps we can say that in God's commonwealth, the experience of the most vulnerable shapes the choices we make for the future.

Perhaps this deep vulnerability that occurs in the breaking of marriage connects the two parts of this gospel text. Jesus takes into his arms the most vulnerable, the one with no rights, the one least able to shape her future, and suggests that these are examples of God's reign. If we are to draw conclusions about human relationships from these texts, it is the child, or the most vulnerable in our society, that must lead us. If we are to make new rules, the "least" get the first word in what justice looks like. Truly, if we are not able to embrace these little ones, we cannot understand how to be fully human.

At first glance, the Hebrews text seems far from the concrete historical Jesus. This text reads more like liturgy. In many ways, the Markan image of Jesus sitting with the children in his arms is an icon for the Christ in Hebrews. The God who spoke through the prophets, now speaks through this one, who though a little lower than the angels, chooses to sit with the suffering. Perhaps we need Jesus with the children in order for the grand cosmology of Hebrews to ring true. The "reflection of God's glory" is made "perfect in suffering." The writer of Hebrews, in allowing us to see behind the cosmic screen, makes a connection between the wonder of that first creation in the garden and the messy world of children and divorce. The High Priest is the one who welcomes children;

who delights in the wonder of human life; who binds up the broken, in marriages and in all things; who names our names out loud in the presence of the assembly.

Bradley Schmeling



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