

Preaching Helps

July 3–September 25, 2022:
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost through
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Is the Body of Christ Disabled?

This issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* focuses on disabilities. Disabled bodies and mentally disturbed minds are a problem—or more accurately, they are often a problem within congregations. Even if we install an elevator or build a ramp, people with disabilities hear biblical texts that leave them out unless they become able-bodied. From God's promises in Isaiah 35 to Jesus' encounters with people with disabilities in the gospels to the healing miracles in the book of Acts, the message is clear: every deaf person hears, every blind person sees, every mute person speaks, every leper is made clean, every mentally ill person finds relief, every lame person leaps like a deer. "Go in peace. Your faith has made you well."

Our language can exclude people with disabilities even after the elevator and the ramp have been built. Nancy Mairs was a gifted writer who lived for years with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). She died in 2016 but her writing is very much alive and continues to teach us. In her book *Waist-High in the World* she talks about what it's like to see others at their belt-buckles rather than face to face. She reminds us that our language often demeans by the metaphors we use without thinking. Often, our metaphors equate physical disability with moral failure: "as in 'sit on your ass' (laziness), 'take it lying down' (weakness); 'listen with half an ear' (inattention), and get left 'without a leg to stand on' (unsound argument)..." I can hear her talking to me for I have often prayed, "Forgive us, O God, for being deaf to the cries of the poor, for being blind to the homeless people sleeping on our sidewalks."

Nancy Mairs has more to say: "The fact that the soundness of the body so often serves as a metaphor for its moral health, its deterioration thus implying moral degeneracy, puts me and my kind in a quandary. How can I possibly be 'good'? Let's face it, wicked witches are not just ugly (as sin); they're also bent and misshapen (crooked). I am bent and misshapen, therefore ugly, therefore wicked. And I have no way to atone."¹

What do we do when every biblical text cures disabilities while people with disabilities are still sitting in the pews or waiting outside the church doors to be welcomed in? We listen

for other texts. Another Nancy has been my teacher. Until her death a few years ago, Nancy Eiseland was a professor at Emory University. She was born with a disability that made it difficult and sometimes impossible to walk. A few years ago Nancy and I led a workshop on "Preaching the Healing Texts of the Bible." Nancy pushed all of us, including me, "to put the person with the disability in the speaking center." To do this will mean going beyond the texts we have because the person with the disability is often silent or speaks only after being cured. In some stories, the person with the disability pleads for a cure but has nothing else to say. There are often no solutions in the text itself so we must listen to texts of people who are disabled.

In Mark's gospel the last story before Jesus enters Jerusalem is the healing of a blind man named Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus does speak—in fact, he shouts: "Jesus Son of David, have mercy on me!" At the end of the story, as in most of the healing stories, we are not surprised when Bartimaeus receives his sight. **Could we imagine—a different ending?** "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked Bartimaeus. "I want to follow you," he answered. "I know I shouted at you, but I don't need to shout anymore because you're here. You don't have to shout at me either—I'm blind, but I can hear! Please don't walk away from me in the middle of a conversation just because I can't see you go. That happens to me all the time. Let me rest my hand on your arm. That's all I need to know the way." So the two of them—Jesus and Bartimaeus—walked on together, heading for the Mount of Olives.

One of the participants in the workshop Nancy and I led was a man named Bill. He has severe cerebral palsy, moving his electric scooter with a hand that barely opens. When I first heard Bill speak, I couldn't understand one word—and he loved to speak. Thankfully my friend Melanie—the center director—sat in with our group. She translated Bill's words when I was completely lost. On the last night of the workshop, small groups presented biblical texts in new ways. Bill's group decided on a skit. He wheeled his scooter toward the door that led to the outside. Others in his group chanted: "You can't go out! You'll fall on the steps!" They shouted louder and louder as he got close to the door. They urged the rest of us to join their chant. Then someone in Bill's group opened the door while all of us were still chanting. Bill rolled outside and nodded to us to follow. "Behold the ramp!" he said. "The ramp of God!" He laughed. We all laughed. He claimed his place in the speaking center.

Finding ways to put the person with a disability in the speaking center isn't only a matter of inclusivity or sensitivity. It's a matter of theology. Who is made in the image of God? What does it mean to be made whole? In her book *The Disabled God* Nancy Eiseland writes:

Who is the one we remember in the Eucharist?
 This is the disabled God who is present at the Eucharist

1. Nancy Mairs, *Waist-High in the World: My Life among the Nondisabled* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 57.

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 non-conventional, and sometimes difficult, bodies participate fully in the imago Dei...God is changed by the experience of being a disabled body.²

Hopefully the church can be changed, too. All kinds of bodies are needed to put flesh on the Body of Christ.

I am grateful to pastors who have written for this issue of "Preaching Helps": **Abby Ferjak** has served as pastor at Grace Lutheran Church in Scarsdale, New York, since January 2021. Before serving in her current call, she served as a hospital chaplain. Abby enjoys going on local adventures with her wife (also a Lutheran pastor) and their two children. **Patrick Cabello Hansel** is a retired ELCA pastor, who served for 35 years in urban, bilingual congregations in the south Bronx, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis. He is the author of the poetry collections *The Devouring Land* (Main Street Rag Publishing) and *Quitting Time* (Atmosphere Press). He has published poems and prose in over eighty journals, and won awards from the Loft Literary Center and Minnesota State Arts Board. He is currently working on a novel, as well as serializing his second novella in a local monthly newspaper. His website is: www.artecabellohansel.com. **Joseph Schattauer Paillé** is the pastor of Advent Lutheran Church in Wyckoff, New Jersey. He serves on the board of Cross Roads Camp and Retreat Center, organizes mental health education and advocacy in the community, and has previously served as president of a non-profit that provides emergency financial assistance. He wrote the essay "A House Divided? Reconsidering Newbigin's *The Household of God*, Six Decades Later" for the Vol. 44 No. 2 (2017) issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* and contributed to *Preaching Helps* for Vol. 45 No. 3 (2018).

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 is the author of *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary*. (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. **Peter Carlson Schattauer** serves as associate pastor at Advent Lutheran Church in Maple Grove, Minnesota, as well as the chair of the Board of Directors for Lutheran Campus Ministry – Twin Cities. A graduate of Yale Divinity School and St. Olaf College, Peter's ministry focuses on the connection between worship and life in the world and the creation of space for young adults to explore their faith

2. Nancy Eiseland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Abingdon Press, 1994), 107.

and inquire after God. In his free time, he enjoys reading, cooking, and spending time with friends. **Susan P. Thomas** is an ELCA pastor who lives in Lebanon, New Hampshire. She has served in campus and congregational ministries in North Minneapolis; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Hanover, New Hampshire; and with ELCA Global Mission in Vienna and Jerusalem (in cooperation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jerusalem and the Holy Land). **Michael Wilker** is the new senior pastor of First Lutheran Church, Decorah, Iowa. The previous ten years he served as senior pastor of Lutheran Church of the Reformation, Washington, D.C. A 1994 graduate of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, he served as a bilingual parish pastor in California and New York before becoming executive director of Lutheran Volunteer Corps.

As I write this introduction to "Preaching Helps," the barrage of "Breaking News" is too much to bear: African Americans shot while shopping for groceries in Buffalo, New York; Taiwanese worshippers shot for political reasons in California; nineteen children and two teachers shot in their school in Uvalde, Texas, and the people of Ukraine continuing to endure a tragic, unprovoked war killing thousands and reducing cities to rubble. According to the church calendar, we are in the season of Ordinary Time, but we know these days are far from ordinary. God bless your preaching as we move through the Sundays of summer into autumn, when the extraordinary often interrupts the ordinary. And if this Ordinary season includes any vacation, bless that time of rest and renewal.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, *Preaching Helps*

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost July 3, 2022

Isaiah 66:10-14

Psalms 66:1-9

Galatians 6:(1-6), 7-16

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Exploring the Texts

In our gospel story—unique to Luke—Jesus sends seventy disciples out in mission. Unlike the twelve who have previously been sent to the region of Galilee, these disciples are sent to the less friendly environs of Samaria. We can see Lukan themes in the emphasis on these disciples being sent (*apostellō*) with the authority of enacting Jesus' mission in a new context. Likewise, their instruction to enter a home with a greeting of peace recalls Zechariah's joy that Jesus would "guide our feet in the way of peace" (1:79) and points

forward to how the risen Christ greets his disciples (24:36). The disciples are sent not simply to emulate Jesus but to participate in his mission in a new context.

Our Galatians reading shows that this mission is not without hazard. Though conflict threatens to tear the community apart, Paul addresses these believers as “brothers” (*adelphos*) because they are all bound together by the Spirit (*pneumatikos*). The early verses—optional in the lectionary—suggest that reconciliation in the community should not be an opportunity for self-righteous feelings of superiority. This theme of false pride is picked up in the later section where Paul warns that circumcision might become a cause for boasting. Instead, Paul proclaims that there can be no self-righteous pride since our salvation comes through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. To live as God’s people means bearing one another’s burdens as Christ bore ours.

The selection from Isaiah uses maternal imagery to describe the relationship between the Israelites and their faithful God. The tactile imagery of “drink[ing] deeply with delight” and being “dandled on her knees” is balanced with a repeated emphasis on God’s comforting presence in verse 13. This call to comfort calls to mind the promise of comfort from chapter 40 when restoration seemed a remote possibility. Taken together, these images suggest that God will not simply provide the Israelites with the sustenance to survive but will care for them as they bind up their wounds and heal from their exile.

The psalm for the day responds to the promise of God’s presence with an invitation for thanks and praise. The lectionary selection includes an invitation for praise repeated three times, inviting praise, not simply from the people of Israel or the nations but from “all the earth.” The middle invitation recalls God’s liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt by “turn[ing] the sea into dry land.” God’s power over creation is directed toward freedom from death and covenant with one another.

Pastoral Reflections

In this week’s gospel reading from Luke, the disciples marvel that “even the demons submit to us!” For those of us familiar with the trajectory of Luke-Acts, the success of their mission may not be wholly surprising. More intriguing is Jesus’ instruction that there will be places where the disciples’ message will be rejected. Jesus offers this caution not as something that may occur if the disciples mess up but as a reality of announcing the kingdom of God. Apparent failure does not mean a lack of faith or conviction. Luke’s Jesus creates space for preachers and congregations alike to ask how we deal with failure and rejection in our ministries. Do we avoid new possibilities for fear of failure? Do we tone down our proclamation for fear of rejection? Do we internalize it as

a reflection of our worth? Or can we see a way to fail faithfully in our mission?

This emphasis on feelings of loss is alluded to in our Isaiah reading. While Isaiah invites joy from those who exult in the return to Jerusalem, the prophet also acknowledges that there are those who mourn. This mourning may be because of losses experienced during the trauma of the exile, but it may also be a realization that the city they’ve returned to is not the one they left. At the time of writing, refugees from Ukraine are beginning to return to the homes they left earlier this year. While this return may bring relief, it certainly brings with it a deep sense of grief. For those struggling to reacclimate to a new life in a familiar place, the prophet’s announcement of God’s lasting comfort may be a balm.

The promise of God’s presence is the buried lead in our Galatians reading. Not until we’ve heard about all the Galatians’ problems do we hear that “a new creation is everything!” Without a new creation, Paul’s letter would be just more advice on managing conflict. Instead, the resurrection has created a new reality from which community members can find their identity, worth, and future. Instead of a zero-sum economy of exchange, God creates a household of reciprocity where our burdens are carried and our flourishing enjoyed together.

The psalm for the day appears to be all major-key praise, but there is a tension lying in its treatment of the particular and universal. God’s power is universal over all of creation, but it is also revealed through the liberation of the Israelites, a particular people in history. We might ask how these universal and particular dynamics play out in our congregations. Does our emphasis on universal engagement overlook the particular experiences of those we serve? Or does our focus on particular groups make our universal invitation to praise ring hollow? The psalmist suggests that particular/universal interplay can be a life-giving sign of God’s new creation.

Joseph Schattauer Paille

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost July 10, 2022

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Psalm 25:1-10

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

Engaging the Texts

On the edge of the promised land, Moses reminds the Israelites to live into their covenant with God in their new home. First, Moses conveys God’s desire to “prosper” the people. This is emphasized through repeated prosperity

for the Israelites' descendants, livestock, and crops. Second, Moses assures the people that God's covenant commands are not too hard. Robert Alter notes that the root for "hard" (*p-l*) emphasizes something that is hidden.³ God is not out to trick the Israelites but intends for their wellbeing at this transition.

If Moses speaks of God's commands in general terms, the psalmist looks for God's "ways" in a situation of crisis. Surrounded by "wantonly treacherous" enemies, the author looks for a way out of this bind that is in keeping with God's commands. The psalmist's commitment to "wait all day long" suggests an assurance of God's coming action no matter what more expedient solutions present themselves. Indeed, God's *hesed* is so deep that God will not only reveal salvation to the penitent, but that God even "instructs sinners in the way."

Moses' assurance of God's intention of wellbeing is also reflected in our reading from Colossians. The author prays that these new believers might be given knowledge, strength, endurance, and joy. Yet the emphasis rests not simply on the future but also on how the gospel is "bearing fruit" already in the life of this community. In addition to fruitfulness being a sign of God's blessing in the Hebrew Bible, it suggests a gift that can be cultivated but not created. This fruit imagery also highlights how this community has both received the gospel from and given it to a wider network of people.

Many listeners will anticipate the kicker of Jesus' parable: the Samaritan turns out to be the good neighbor. Easily overlooked are the assumptions latent in the lawyer's question. His focus on what he "must" do reveals a concern on meeting requirements, and his desire to "inherit" (*klēronomeō*) eternal life recalls the importance of family ties that are received, not created relationships. What is remarkable about the Samaritan is not simply his generosity, but his ability to generate new categories and systems of relationship that transcend those that he has inherited. Unlike the lawyer, who identifies the neighbor (*plēsion*) as a category fixed by the world around him, the Samaritan creates neighbors through his generosity.

Pastoral Reflections

Jesus' use of "neighboring" as a verb can serve as an invitation to reevaluate the ways our congregations relate to our neighbors. If we love the people who live in our neighborhoods, whom are we leaving out? How have inherited legacies of injustice and inequality shaped what we perceive to be normal? Similarly, we might also ask which individuals and communities are overlooked in the stories we tell about the areas we live in? Jesus reminds us that what is inherited is not always life-giving, and that we can create different systems

and relationships with God's people.

We see a similar change of relationships in how the psalmist addresses his enemies. They are not simply to be removed but to be guided into the paths of God's peace. A sermon could reflect on those we consider our enemies and reflect on the way we extend God's *hesed* to those we find most difficult to love. This could also be integrated into the intercessory prayers. The *Book of Common Prayer* offers one such prayer for our enemies, asking that God would "lead them and us from prejudice to truth... and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you."

We might assume the author of Colossians praises their audience to create such a relationship, but there may be more going on. As the Italian feminist Adriana Cavarero writes, "I tell you my story in order to make you tell it to me."⁴ The author tells the Colossians their own story but weaves it together with the story of God's self-giving love. Identity isn't simply expressed from within but created through relationships. A sermon could combine this with our gospel text to explore how our neighbors would tell the stories of our communities of faith. How might these stories surprise, challenge, and inspire us?

Preachers wary of the prosperity gospel may be tempted to skip today's Deuteronomy reading, but such a move would be unfortunate. For the Israelites, the law is intended not as an arbitrary test that might merit a reward but as a way of reordering society according to the lovingkindness of God instead of the whims of pharaoh. The "prosperity" Moses alludes to should be understood not in terms of capitalism and markets but through the lens of a people emerging from slavery into freedom. As the prophets will remind the people later, prosperity that is not shared equitably among all God's people is not prosperity at all.

Joseph Schattauer Paille

3. Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary (Vol. Three-Volume Set)* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 722.

4. Quoted in Ross Collin, "The Uncontainable Elena Ferrante in 'In the Margins,'" *Chicago Review of Books*, March 15, 2022, <https://chireviewofbooks.com/2022/03/15/in-the-margins/>.

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost July 17, 2022

Genesis 18:1–10a

Psalm 15

Colossians 1:15–28

Luke 10:38–42

Engaging the Texts

Themes of abiding with God, God abiding with us, and hospitality run through today's readings. The text from Genesis brings Abraham and Sarah one step closer to God's promise of numerous descendants made years earlier. Abraham runs to greet three unknown men in the heat of the day. It is unclear if the Lord mentioned in the first verse is one of the men. The mysterious nature of the visitors and the ambiguity of "the Lord" being counted as one of the three heightens the drama around the most unlikely declaration: that Sarah will become pregnant. After offering the visitors humble bread and water, Abraham orders Sarah and the servant to create a feast instead: cakes, curds, milk, and meat. This again signals something important is about to happen. The reading ends before Sarah laughs, so we are left pondering the reaction to the pregnancy prediction.

Our psalm for the day is a liturgy for entrance into the sanctuary. Who may abide on the Lord's holy hill? The psalmist's answer to this question sets a very high moral and ethical bar. Those who are blameless, who do not go against their word, who do not give money out of hope for gain, who speak the truth from their heart—these are the ones who may dwell and abide.

The text from Colossians begins with what may have been a common hymn among believers in the region (vv. 15-20). The primacy of Jesus is the emphasis: as the head of the church, as "the image of the invisible God" (v. 15), as the means of reconciliation to God. This reconciliation has made the believers "blameless" (v. 22). The mystery is that Christ is in you, and because of that, the church and those in it share in Christ's life, suffering, and glory.

Finally, the themes of abiding with God and hospitality come into focus in the text from Luke. In this familiar story, Martha invites Jesus into her home. Upset that her sister is not helping with the very important tasks of providing hospitality for their guests, Martha tells Jesus to tell Mary to help her. Jesus does not deny there are tasks to do, or even that they are important tasks. What he does do is name that Martha is worried and distracted, and that the "better" thing is to sit and listen to Jesus. Mary's disciple-like behavior of listening is defined as "better," which is in contrast to later definitions of discipleship as service. Discipleship as viewed from this text

does not preclude service, but places listening to Jesus as the more urgent task.

Pastoral Reflections

Both the Genesis and Luke texts lend themselves to reflections on hospitality and abiding with God. In Luke, Martha, intent on providing good hospitality is told that Mary's choice to sit and listen is "better." In Genesis, Abraham is stirred from his rest in order to provide good hospitality for strangers. One never knows exactly how and when God will show up. Abraham was resting in the heat of the day when the Lord appeared to him. In the heat of the day, he goes running around camp to make his visitors welcome. Abraham goes above and beyond in providing hospitality for the travelers. This brings to mind current issues around immigrants and refugees. What is our individual and community response to the strangers in our midst? How do we meet the Lord when we welcome the stranger?

The Psalm and Colossians passages might present more of a preaching challenge. It's easy to get lost in the many words of the Colossians text. However, they could provide an opportunity to reflect on Christ in you. What does that mean for the individual, the church, and the world? There could be an interesting connection drawn to the psalm in reflecting on how we aim to live as a community of faith and as people with "Christ in us" living in the world. What difference does it make that Christ is in us?

The Luke text about Jesus' visit to the home of Martha and Mary presents several preaching possibilities. For many sitting in the pews, this story can bring mixed reactions. In every faith community there is usually a small group of stalwart volunteers who really do keep the church running in one way or another. Hearing this text can bring some resentment—who else is going to do it?! It can also bring a welcome invitation to rest. To pare down the business and listen. In an over-programmed world, we hear a countercultural claim about what is "better." Service in the life of faith is critical but listening to Jesus is first. What would it look like to hone our ability to be still and listen to what God is saying to us? What would it look like to hone our ability to listen to God not just in silence, prayer, or meditation, but through our neighbors? How do we listen deeply to one another? How might that direct us as we go out to serve?

Abby Ferjak

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 24, 2022

Genesis 18:20–32

Psalm 138

Colossians 2:6–15 (16–19)

Luke 11:1–13

Engaging the Texts

The theme of persistent prayer runs through the readings for this day. Our Genesis reading comes just after a son is promised to aging Abraham and Sarah. After promising a beginning, the Lord must now see to an ending. This conversation, written after the account of the destruction of Sodom, serves as a critique to the treatment of the city. Abraham dares to ask the Lord risky questions, and in doing so, implies the Lord's treatment of the city is unjust and questions the character of God. Abraham has some skin in the game—his nephew, Lot, is in Sodom. We learn that the Lord values the righteous more than gaining vengeance against the unrighteous. Abraham's advocacy for the righteous in the city seems to have swayed the Lord and saved the whole community for the moment. Because of God's freedom to change and Abraham's willingness to challenge, mercy prevails over judgment.

In our psalm of thanksgiving, the author recalls a time when God answered a call for help. The psalmist draws on this memory in the midst of current trouble, strengthened by God's presence in past turmoil. This memory also serves as evidence that God will continue to work in the life of the psalmist and will “make good” (v. 8) on God's purpose for the author.

In our Colossians text, we continue to see the author addressing controversies in the community of believers. This time, the controversy involves following “philosophy and empty deceit” (v. 8). The author encourages the Colossians to live as they were taught with Christ as the head of the church body. In baptism, a “spiritual circumcision” (v. 11), the believers have come to fullness. Their sins are already forgiven and they have already been made alive with Jesus. Any record of wrongdoing has been erased already. Therefore, there is no need to listen to philosophers who argue that more must be done—more self-denial, worship of other mystical creatures, or more visions are needed to complete what only Christ can and has done in baptism.

Our Luke text highlights the theme of persistence in prayer. After seeing Jesus pray, the disciples ask that he teach them how to pray. Jesus teaches them the prayer in verses 2–4, a shorter version of the Lord's Prayer found in Matt 6:9–13. Jesus follows this lesson with a story that illustrates how persistence can get one what they need, even if the bonds of a

relationship cannot. If one is persistent in asking, knocking, and seeking, the loving God will give the Holy Spirit.

Pastoral Reflections

Abraham's conversation with the Lord is rich in preaching potential. Many listeners may be surprised that Abraham questions God's justice and character. Not only that, but through Abraham's challenging questions, the Lord concedes the plan for destruction (for now). A focus could be persistent advocacy for true justice—one that leaves room for mercy and transformation. The Lord entertained Abraham's bold questions. We should not only boldly question systems of justice-keeping ourselves, but also entertain the bold questions of those who advocate for a new paradigm of justice. Passages with divine destruction can be difficult to preach. Much historical and literary context that many listeners are not familiar with is needed to illuminate the story. It also holds true that no matter how much context is provided or how skillfully it's given by a preacher, what listeners hear in regard to divine destruction is as much determined by their past and experience as the words spoken.

The psalm provides an opportunity to center memory in the life of faith. Memory of prayers answered, of God's presence in difficult moments, provides strength in the midst of current struggles. Memory feeds our praise and thanksgiving. This focus could include personal memory, but also communal memory. Has the congregation or community experienced trauma or difficulty in the past? Where was God in those moments? What was the faith community's purpose in those moments?

A preaching focus of the Colossians text could center on coming “to fullness in him” (v. 9). As faith communities, we are to be a place where nothing is required in order to be welcomed in. How is that stance different from what many areas of belonging in the world require? How do our faith communities adhere to “human tradition” (v. 8) and try to be gatekeepers for God? Are we being called to reexamine our expectations of each other and our neighbors?

In Luke, we get an opportunity to examine the Lord's Prayer in the context of worship. A preacher could use this to look at the differences and similarities between it and the Matthew version. If the faith community is using the “old” version of the Lord's Prayer, this might be a moment to explore why a move to the “new” version might be warranted. Another preaching topic could center on prayer—what it is, why we do it, and our expectations of it. It might seem as if Jesus is saying here that if you simply are annoying enough, God will give you whatever you want. A closer look at the story reveals that Jesus is indeed advocating for persistence in prayer, but what is promised because of that persistence is not any little thing of *want*, but what we *need*—the Holy

Spirit. How might receiving what we *need* help us navigate our struggles in ways different from what we may have wanted or expected?

Abby Ferjak

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost July 31, 2022

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12–14; 2:18–23

Psalms 49:1–12

Colossians 3:1–11

Luke 12:13–21

Engaging the Texts

Jesus is on the journey to Jerusalem, on the route of his *exodus* (Luke 9:31). Teaching his disciples and the crowds, Jesus brings release to God's people within and beyond Israel. Dialoging with adversaries, Jesus pushes the boundaries of God's reign and its expression in communal, daily living. Last week in the lectionary (Seventh Sunday after Pentecost) Jesus taught the disciples to pray and persevere. Then Jesus cast out a demon which provoked divisive questions about Jesus' identity. Next, Jesus accepted a Pharisee's invitation to dinner and turned the meal into a controversy about purity, hypocrisy, justice, love, wealth, and generosity. Meanwhile crowds were gathering by the thousands to hear Jesus. He first exhorted the crowds to align their private and public practices and trust God's care, forgiveness, and guidance. In this week's gospel text, someone in the crowds asks Jesus to arbitrate a family dispute about inheritance. Jesus refuses to adjudicate the dispute yet teaches the crowds by telling a parable of a rich fool. After the parable (beyond this pericope and extending to the text for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost) Jesus teaches the disciples about wealth and God's providence.

Jesus' parable about a rich man is paired with the teaching from Ecclesiastes. The lectionary stops short of including verse 24. In the parable, the rich man quotes verse 24 almost verbatim: "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God." For mortals, chasing knowledge and hoarding possessions for posterity is perfectly pointless because once we die all our wisdom and wealth may be used by the wise or the foolish regardless of the producers' power. After the famous poem in chapter 3 ("For everything there is a season..."), the Teacher again says there is nothing better for mortals than to eat, drink, and enjoy the fruit of their labor (3:13), but unjust, unrighteous, and wicked people oppress workers and steal their labor. Psalm 49 reinforces the idea that mortals, in our vanity and pomp, die like every other animal (vv. 12 and 20).

The second reading for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost is the final excerpt from this season's semi-continuous reading from Colossians. Today's text (3:1-11) encourages hearers to focus on Christ in God, strip away the abusive self, be clothed with the renewal of the image of our Creator, and recognize that renewed, ethical relationships cross every boundary of enslavement, nationality, and piety.

Pastoral Reflections

When I was a kid growing up in rural southern Minnesota, one of our congregation's favorite songs was "Seek ye first the kingdom of God." It was written by Karen Lafferty and published in 1972. Lafferty was struggling to pay her monthly bills when she went to a Bible study coincidentally about Matt 6:33. She went home and composed the tune on her guitar. The song and the biblical verse(s) it's based on may be a very helpful key for the preacher and congregation over these next two Sundays.

The gospel pericopes for the Eighth and Ninth Sundays after Pentecost are two parts of Jesus' teaching about our possessions and generosity in God's reign. The lectionary omits the bridge verses 22-31. These verses can support the sermon on either Sunday. The first Sunday with the parable of the rich fool, could focus on personal matters of money and mortality. The next Sunday can widen the circle to see how God's promise and the presence of Jesus affects our communal economics. A verse that could connect both, yet which is not read on either Sunday is Luke 12:31: "strive for his kingdom and these things will be given to you as well." The verse's parallel is in Matt 6:33 which is appointed for the Eighth Sunday after Epiphany. So, this verse and its full context are rarely heard in worship. Highlighting these verses can also serve as a counterpoint to the previous week's text about prayer ["ask and you will receive" (11:9-10)] which might be read by itself as prosperity-seeking. But with these verses and the texts from Ecclesiastes and Colossians, our prayer can align our human desiring to God's purposes and ways, on God's presence and reign.

The 1970s, in a world-wide economy flush with "petrodollars," were a time of expanding farms, new barn buildings, and pride in agricultural production. Partly in response to competing with and having a huge contract to sell food to the Soviet Union, the U.S. government encouraged farmers to feed the world and plant "fencerow to fencerow." At about the same time inflation began sky rocketing, access to lending tightened, interest rates increased dramatically, and then the U.S.S.R. invaded Afghanistan and the U.S. enacted a grain embargo. These forces combined had a devastating effect upon rural communities, farmers, and their families. Waterloo, Iowa, lost 14 percent of its population in the early 1980s. Scores of homes were abandoned. While I know

personally that many deaths by suicide in that era were among closeted gay youth, rural youth of all sexual orientations and gender identities also suffered high levels of mental illness, depression, and anxiety. In the 1980s, death by suicide became one of the leading causes of death for rural teenagers.

Our foolish greed causes so much harm. God knows that we need both beauty and bread to enjoy life and has promised to provide them. Jesus exhorts us not to be guided by greed or chased by anxiety, but to seek first the promised kingdom of God.

Michael Wilker

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost August 7, 2022

Genesis 15:1–6

Psalm 33:12–22

Hebrews 11:1–3, 8–16

Luke 12:32–40

Engaging the Texts

The gospel for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost connects communal living with the eschatological visitation of the Son of Man. On our way to the eschatological future, God's promised reign interrupts and re-orders our life together now.

Jesus continues to calm the economic anxieties of the disciples and invites them to generosity in their community. Then Jesus increases the tension between the coming reign of God and communal living with a parable about a master/lord who has gone away to a wedding banquet while the enslaved workers remain in the house waiting. The returning master, upon finding his enslaved workers ready for service, turns the tables and serves them instead. Then comes another line about a homeowner's vigilance and a thief breaking in unexpectedly. The pericope concludes with Jesus saying, "You must be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

In the next section (Luke 41–48), Peter asks the Lord for an explanation of the parable: Who should be vigilant? Then Jesus tells a violent parable about an angry lord/master who cuts up the bodies of abusive slaves, beats other slaves who should have known better, and lightly beats slaves who didn't know they were doing the wrong things.

Paired with the gospel text for today is an excerpt from the story of Abram seeking assurance from God about his posterity (which was also read earlier this year on Lent 2 C). Yahweh had called Abram to leave his homeland and promised to make of him a great nation to be a blessing to all nations. Along the journey, Abram lied to save his own life and allowed Sarai to be held in the Pharaoh's household as either a slave, concubine, or wife. God sent a plague upon Pharaoh's house,

and Sarai was expelled.

After a successful military campaign (Chapter 14), "the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision." God says: Do not fear, Abram. I am your shield. Your reward will be great." Then, for the first time in the Bible, Abram speaks directly to Yahweh. Abram's prayer is a request and a complaint. What will you give me? I'm childless and Eliezer of Damascus will be my heir. God is silent. Abram prays again because he has no offspring, and a slave will be his heir. Then God brings Abram outside and tells Abram to try to count the stars—that's how many your biological descendants ("issue from your loins" Gen 15:4) will be. Then Abram trusted and Yahweh recognized his righteousness.

The last half of Psalm 33 is chosen as a response to God's promise to Abram. The psalm gives praise for the powerful word of Yahweh which creates the world and governs the peoples with faithfulness, righteousness, justice, and steadfast love (vv. 4–5). The portion appointed for worship warns the nation that military might cannot save; only Yahweh can. Those who revere Yahweh expect divine steadfast love to deliver them from death and famine. Verse 20 refers to God as our shield, which makes a direct connection to Yahweh's own self-description in today's Genesis text.

The letter from Hebrews brings hope to a discouraged Christian community. Chapter 10 acknowledges the difficulties the present community had been facing (lack of attendance, confiscation of property, waning energy). As God was faithful to the promises and covenant with ancestors like Abraham and Sarah, who though good as dead had descendants as many as the stars, God will be loyal and will keep the new covenant through Jesus Christ.

Pastoral Reflections

As I prepare to preach on the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, I want to contend with Abram and remember the people he enslaved—and our own history of enslaving people for our own economic well-being. As Abram trusted God's call, along the way Abram acquired and enslaved people and animals in Haran and in Egypt. In Egypt, he acquired humans and animals while Sarai was held in Pharaoh's house. In today's text he complained to God that one of those he has enslaved will inherit his property. God glides over that flatly saying "this [man] is not in the Hebrew text] will not be your heir." God promises Abram's biological descendants will be as numerous as the stars. Abram trusted and God reckoned him righteous.

The story continues with the cutting of a covenant by Yahweh with Abram. During the ritual, a deep sleep and terrifying darkness descended upon Abram, then Yahweh said Abram's offspring will be aliens and slaves, oppressed for 400 years (Gen 15:13–14). Then Yahweh will judge the nation that enslaved them, and the freed offspring will come out with

many possessions. The lectionary for Lent 2 C omits these verses, includes the conclusion of the covenant ritual regarding the land, but omits the names of the peoples that were already living on that land (Gen 15:20). Later (Chapter 16), Sarai and Hagar are embroiled in conflict within patriarchy and enslavement.

All this may be old news, but we erase indigenous peoples, excise mention of slavery from our texts, and are still captive to patriarchy. We cannot reconcile the faith of our founders with the fact they enslaved, treated, and killed other human beings like animals.

Maybe Jesus' parable about a master turning the tables and serving his slaves can help us. Maybe considering Jesus as a thief breaking into our household/economy to steal away our possessions can be a source of liberation and freedom. Maybe Jesus is like Harriet Tubman who helped enslaved people steal away to the promised land of freedom. So, get ready to get free. Jesus is coming soon.

Michael Wilker

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost August 14, 2022

Jeremiah 23:23–29

Psalm 82

Hebrews 11:29–12:2

Luke 12:49–56

Give justice to the weak and the orphan; aintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. —Psalm 82:3

Running the Race

Fifteen years ago, toward the end of my last sabbatical, my wife and I had one of those “aha” experiences that connects you with a passage from scripture like today’s from Hebrews. We were in Delphi, Greece, one of the most astonishingly beautiful archaeological sites in the world, situated on the slopes of Mt. Parnassus thousands of feet above the Bay of Itea. As a classics and history major in college, I was well aware that Delphi claimed the status in the ancient world as the so called “*omphalos*” or “navel” of the universe. There dwelt the Delphic “oracle,” a priestess who would dispense sage advice to political leaders in rhyming riddles which could be variously interpreted, thereby safe guarding her claim to infallibility in prophesying. “Delphic,” in fact, would find its own place in the dictionary as an adjective meaning both “oracular” and “ambiguous” or “obscure in meaning.” Imposing as the temple of Apollo must have been, whose “rib cage” of columns still stands, even more impressive to us as visitors were the far better-preserved theatre and stadium found farther up the steep mountainside. The stadium had been built

originally by the Greeks and then expanded by the Romans to afford spectators at the quadrennial “Pythian Games” a beautiful perspective not only of the competing athletes but of the surrounding mountains and the bay far below where ships would lay at anchor.

To get to my point, inside the spacious stadium we found opportunity for a photo op. I got down into a four–point stance at the starting line where one can still see indentations in the stone starting blocks. Here I connected with today’s scriptural metaphor of the race of faith from Hebrews. Imagine, as in some Olympic marathons, the long-distance runners finally enter the stadium to the cheering crowds of spectators, the “**cloud of witnesses**” that packs the stands urging on the runners to cross the finish line. To alter the image slightly, as our Hebrews text tells it, the race is really more a long distance relay in which the baton of faith is passed from the likes of Rahab to Gideon to Barak to Samson to Jephthah to Samuel to David and the prophets, named and unnamed, male and female, faith being no individual accomplishment but the precious, God-given gift, the “baton” of faith entrusted to each generation to carry and safely pass on. Here Hebrews is painting for us a compelling picture of what the church in time would come to call “the communion of saints,” that cloud of witnesses who after completing the race packs the stands to cheer on the rest of us who continue to “*run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*” (11:32, 12:1–2). My translation would be “front-runner and finisher.”

I remember the occasion vividly of returning to my hometown parish from divinity school to preach for the first time. I took up the scroll of the prophet Jeremiah (today’s reading!) and proceeded to beat my assembled neighbors and family over the head with the adamant word (“*like fire. . . and a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces*” [v. 29]). I preached this word amid the tinderbox context of the divisive Vietnam War and simmering racial turmoil in which it seemed to me that much of the American church was peddling “*lies. . . and the deceit of their own heart*” (v. 26), practicing a false prophesy that settled for telling folks only what they wanted to hear.

Looking back over two-thirds of a life-time ago, I’m not sure that I was entirely wrong in proclaiming the prophet’s word as I did. As much as I hope I’ve matured in my pastoral sensitivities, I’m also too well aware that my youthful zeal for playing the prophet has mellowed. I’m not sure that that’s a good thing—God’s Word being the same incendiary and shattering Word now as then. Our American context has become increasingly desperate for a prophetic Word amid a situation in which religious collusion in false prophesy is a growth industry prospering under political subsidy. How to authentically proclaim the prophetic Word from the pulpit—and, more importantly, live it out in the context of our faith communities and their scattering into the world—is the

difficult issue we face in today's highly politicized environment in which the religious right seems to have become the public face of so-called "organized religion" and in which "evangelical" has assumed "brand-name" identification with extreme conservatism.

Our Gospel reading from Luke pictures a Jeremiah-sounding Jesus who warns of the conflict that his earthly mission will entail—perhaps in the language of a competitive race: the "agon"—the *agon* is an old Greek word that means "contest" or "struggle" as in a distance runner's "hitting the wall" when a "second wind" is needed to surmount the challenge. Reading such conflict in the light of Christian hope is our vocation, the implication of the "baptism" into which not only Jesus, but we, too, are immersed. "Thy Strong Word" (*ELW #511*) sings in valiant triplets of God's incendiary Word which summons us to "Rise Up, O Saints of God" (*ELW #669*) to be ready for the crack of the starter's gun!

John Rollefson

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost August 21, 2022

Isaiah 58:9b–14

Psalm 103:1–8

Hebrews 12:18–29

Luke 13:10–17

Isaiah or Luke?

Those of us who preach today may have a hard time deciding whether to focus on Isaiah 58 or Luke 13. (The reading from Hebrews is more difficult but you're welcome to give it a try!) It's probably possible to make connections between the First Reading and the Gospel, but each of them deserves its own sermon. The Isaiah text begins later than the reading people may remember, starting with those questions in verses 6 and 7. You may want to add those verses so verse 9b doesn't sound so abrupt. But the themes of 9b and 10 echo themes addressed in the earlier section. The promise is the same: "Then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday" (compare 58:8) A new theme enters at the end, in verse 12:

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

How could this be true for Ukrainian refugees returning to their demolished homes and streets? What would it mean to repair the breach between city dwellers and rural people in the United States? How can our streets be restored as safe

places for grocery shoppers and school children? This Isaiah text deserves its own hearing.

But the story in Luke 13 also deserves a hearing. (One of my guideposts for choosing a text for preaching is this: Is there a woman in this text? When the answer is "yes" I'll go with that reading.) How can we hear this story with more attention to the woman? It's possible to retell this story with her at the center. Remember "retelling" is not the same as repeating.

She had grown accustomed to looking at feet. After eighteen years bent down, she knew people by their bunions! Was it osteoporosis or years of women's work—lifting, scrubbing, cleaning, washing feet. The text only tells us she had an ailment that crippled her. According to the RSV translation, she had "a spirit of infirmity." Isn't it likely that she also had an "infirmity of spirit"? She had learned to live bent over for eighteen years. But it was the way people treated her that caused this other infirmity, often more devastating than the first. Sometimes, people spoke over her back as though she wasn't even there or kept their distance as though her condition could be contagious. It took more than a little gumption to come to sabbath service because she knew some considered her condition to be God's punishment for sin—either hers or her parents.

Demeaning words piled up over eighteen years could surely have caused the woman to have an infirmity of spirit. Did anyone bend down to look into her eyes? Did anyone say, "Can I get you anything from the market?" or "Would you like to walk to synagogue with me?" Did anyone ever touch her?

We don't know—we only know that she appeared in the synagogue as Jesus was teaching. She doesn't go to him or cry out for attention. Indeed, she might have gone unnoticed—except, when Jesus saw her, he called her over. She became more important than what he was teaching. Listen carefully to what happens next. Jesus said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." After saying this, Jesus laid his hands on her—and she stood up straight and began praising God. But his first words are very important: "Woman, *you are set free from your infirmity.*" Even before she stood up, even before her physical condition changed, even before she was cured—she was healed.

She was set free. Why couldn't everyone rejoice with her? Note that the religious leader didn't chastise Jesus—he scolded the crowds, including her. After all those years looking at feet, she stood up to see anger and rage—it was enough to make her look down again! But Jesus doesn't leave her standing there alone. He returns to his teaching, but now the subject has changed. He begins to argue case law like a rabbi: "Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? Ought

not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" I wonder if she thought about the tenth commandment when Jesus talked about the ox and the donkey. When I was in confirmation class, we memorized the commandment this way: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife nor his man-servant nor his maid-servant nor his ox nor his ass, nor anything that is your neighbor's." We were giddy because we got to say "ass" in church! Sometimes we said the commandment really fast. When we did, wife and ox and ass blurred together as though they were all the same—all a man's property. I have no idea if she thought about such things, but she must have been delighted when Jesus called her "a daughter of Abraham." That phrase—daughter of Abraham—is found only here in all of the gospels.⁵ She was more than property. She was a member of the family cherished by God.

I wish we knew her name! We know she began praising God, but we don't know what she said! What if she could speak today in our time, in this space—an act of holy imagination.

"I love those curb cuts in the sidewalk—I think that's what you call them," she says "and those kneeling buses, too! I rode one of your buses and at one stop, the driver got up, lowered a lift and a woman in the wheelchair rolled right on—and nobody on the bus complained! Well, that surprised me because I'd been told that city people are always in a hurry!"

We don't have to imagine such a conversation because there are people with disabilities who can be our teachers. Nancy Mairs, the author I quoted in the introduction to "Preaching Helps," can be one of our teachers. As her MS became more debilitating, she wrote about making a map—a map to negotiate the unknown territory ahead of her, a map that might help the rest of us who will someday feel our bodies giving way. "I mean to make a map," she says. "My infinitely harder task is to conceptualize not merely a habitable body, but a habitable world: a world that wants me in it."⁶

How can we create a habitable world where people with disabilities are welcomed and honored as they are—even when they're not cured?

Barbara K. Lundblad

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

5. Sharon Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 187-188.

6. Nancy Mairs, *Waist-High in the World: A Life Among the Nondisabled* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 63.

August 28, 2022

Proverbs 25:6–7 (or Sirach 10:12–18)

Psalm 112

Hebrews 13:1–8, 15–16

Luke 14:1, 7–14

Engaging the Texts

I wrote these reflections during the week of the massacre in Uvalde Texas, a few days after the massacre in Buffalo. It doesn't make me a cynic to wonder what the next week or few days might bring. We've all probably thought that. In the midst of the continuing horror of gun violence and the continuing lack of political will to address it, we may be forgiven if we wonder if it makes any difference what we preach.

The texts for this Sunday hold out the promise of a great reversal in the world, and also give hearers some practical advice on how to live into that. The Proverbs text will be echoed in Jesus' teaching in the Gospel, so I will spend a little time with Sirach. Right smack in the middle of the passage is the proclamation that God is about fundamental change:

¹⁴The Lord overthrows the thrones of rulers,
and enthrones the lowly in their place.

¹⁵The Lord plucks up the roots of the nations,
and plants the humble in their place.

Stirring words in the tradition of Hannah and Mary! Haven't we longed for this, even though it may mean that *our* power will be overthrown? But there is even a deeper challenge in the beginning and end of the passage:

¹²The beginning of human pride is
to forsake the Lord;
the heart has withdrawn from its Maker.

I tend to see pride as a tempting emotion, one that we need to root out. But here, the writer also directly connects it to justice. Pride pours out abominations, and God will overthrow that! Whether that be pride in our successes, in our standing and certainly in ourselves as a people. Indeed, I wonder if it is not our national pride that has kept us from choosing real solutions to violence, to climate change and racism and on and on. If we believe that we are doing a good job, what is the need to be humbled and taught by anyone?

Psalm 112 lays out the reality of how the just live, and how the unjust do not, and what results we can expect from this. The Hebrews text gives some very practical advice about how the beloved community is to live that together. Practical, and with a deeper look, astonishing. Mutual love includes "Show(ing) hospitality to strangers." Well that tumbles down our siloed lives! "Remember those in prison...and those being

tortured.” The ending of v. 3 literally says to remember them as if “you were in the body.” A radical solidarity is the path of discipleship in the great reversal.

In the Gospel, Jesus takes the great reversal and radical solidarity to the beautiful extreme he loves to live in. First, he echoes Proverbs with the practical advice of “not looking like a loser in front of everyone.” But his second teaching ups the stakes: be generous, as the truly just do. But be generous with those on the bottom, not the top. Offer hospitality and be in solidarity with those who are rejected and ignored. You’ll still get to eat well, by the way! And the company may be a lot more interesting!

You may want to add in verses 2–6 which are not part of the appointed text. Jesus heals—on the Sabbath—a man with edema (or dropsy. To be honest, I had to look up both!) He enacts, in the body, the very teaching he shares, ignoring the risk that breaking a hallowed rule might bring.

Jesus can be this bold because he lives out of the promise lifted up in Hebrews:

“The Lord is my helper;
I will not be afraid.
What can anyone do to me?”

Of course, that promise rings throughout Scriptures. Jesus embodies that fully. Even on the cross, even in the midst of feeling and being forsaken, he acts generously and justly to bring in the greatest reversal of all.

Next week, we get to wrestle with the cost of following Jesus’ way. But maybe it’s enough for this week to practice radical hospitality, remember those oppressed, bless intimate relationships and resist the love of money! A lot to work on, but we can trust the promise underneath our call to discipleship, for “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

Patrick Cabello Hansel

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 4, 2022

Deuteronomy 30:15–20

Psalm 1

Philemon 1–21

Luke 14:25–33

Engaging the Texts

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity” (Deut 30:15). Pretty straightforward, right? We have a choice. We make the choice. We get the consequences. Except, as St. Paul reminds us, we don’t exactly do

the good we want, but the evil we do not want. Luther might even remind us that we *can’t* do the good we are called to, because we are in bondage to sin. At this point, a voice from seminary is speaking in my head: “But where is the Gospel in this?”

It seems like only law, law that convicts us and leads us, in despair, to the throne of grace. I won’t diminish that, but I want to take another tack: Rather than a word about God’s blessing and wrath, this passage could be titled: “That’s the way the world works, friends.”

The consequences spelled out connect Israel’s actions directly to the response of the land to be given them. By the time Deuteronomy was “found” in the temple, they had plenty of data to go on. When they followed the God of life, relative peace and prosperity ensued. When they forgot about widows, orphans and the stranger, then strife, corruption, and violence followed.

Does that apply to us? Perhaps nowhere can we see that more clearly than in climate change. We have abused the land that we are called to steward in God’s name, and the land has responded with increased drought, fires, and storms. For perhaps the first time in human history, we are on a path that will mean not only destruction for many species, but also the end of our way of life as we know it. Will we make the right choices?

We could try to spiritualize our way out of this, but we see its effect in other areas, for example, the use of violence. Fr. John Dear in <http://johndear.org/the-nonviolence-of-jesus/> writes: “Violence leads to further violence, Jesus says over and over again. Conversely, nonviolence leads to further nonviolence, Jesus proclaims. Nonviolence, a law of nature, leads to life, love, justice and peace. If you are nonviolent, Jesus declares, you will find life.”

The verbs in this passage indicate the clear, simple choices: **loving** God, **walking** in God’s way, **observing** God’s commands. In English, “observing” has two meanings: obeying and seeing clearly. When we observe what the earth is telling us, we can see how our actions bless or curse our very home.

Psalm 1 continues the refrain of “actions = consequences” again using earth images we can clearly observe: trees, streams, leaves, chaff.

Philemon is a hard text for any of us to preach on, especially given the state of our racial reckoning in this country. I wrote this in Minneapolis during the week of the second anniversary of George Floyd’s murder. Many words have been spoken here, and in the nation, over the past few days. Almost all of them bemoan the fact that we haven’t come very far in confronting racism.

My soul longs for the great reversal of last week’s texts; for God to upend structures of white supremacy and violence.

I would have liked Paul to clearly denounce racism and all its works and empty promises. He doesn't. I've been in very heated pericope studies about what Paul actually asks (or commands) of Philemon. My take is that he is asking him to release Onesimus from slavery and receive him as a brother, but I really don't know.

I do know that Paul's appeal is to replace structures with relationships. Over and over, he uses relational words: brother, dear friend, father, partner, beloved one. Whether that is a sufficient program for anti-racism or not, it surely can be the way we see and treat each other in community.

And then the Gospel. We could try to spiritualize our way out of this, too; but Jesus' language is especially sharp and clear. The only way to life is giving up. Everything! Family, life and—God help us—our possessions! There is a practical side to this: you don't want to be mocked or destroyed in war. But the teaching is clear: the way to life leads through the cross.

Again, as in the great reversal, we see that our God is a God from below, not above. A God who stands with, and indeed, in the body, with those who suffer.

I have been reading Richard Rohr's book *Breathing Under Water*, which connects spirituality with the 12-Step program. I imagine most of us have had 12-step groups in our buildings, and I suspect many of us participate in something that utilizes that wisdom. Like the very words of the gospel, the 12-step path is not hard to understand, but hard to admit to (the first verb in step #1). As Fr. Rohr notes, we are all addicted to sin, and at the root of that is our holding onto our beliefs, prerogatives, and agendas. It is a refusal to admit that sovereignty is God's prerogative, not ours.

Jesus has lived that out in front of his followers, and now calls them to follow the path he has chosen. The path to life is one of kenosis: an emptying of ourselves, so that God can fill us with incredible power. This is the gospel way, and our call to discipleship. For me, even making a little progress on this is a struggle. This struggle will be a part of my whole life, but one that brings healing and hope.

Jesus is not calling for a radical asceticism, but a radical trust in God. We are still called to enjoy and steward all the good gifts of creation. I believe it was Thomas Merton who said that the "great saints" did not give up the enjoyment of life's blessings, but the possession of them. They received the gifts of God with gratitude but did not hoard the freely given manna.

In this Gospel call, like all others, the **challenge** is based on the **promise** (call it law and gospel if you'd like). Jesus says: come and be one with me, as I am one with God. The way to receive that is to let go. Open hands (and hearts) can receive the blessing, closed cannot.

(Note that Jesus never commands or invites us to make others give up. Unfortunately, we need to remind ourselves

and the world of that often enough.)

With the incredible challenges before us as a people, this is the only way that abundant life works. We believe this, dear God! Help us in our unbelief!

One of my favorite poems is "The Waking" by Theodore Roethke. The last couplet reads:

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

May our waking to the strange and wonderful way of Jesus be slow, and may our learning be a gentle and powerful surprise!

Patrick Cabello Hansel

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 11, 2022

Exodus 32:7–14

Psalm 51:1–10

1 Timothy 1:12–17

Luke 15:1–10

Engaging the Texts

On the surface, the four texts assigned for this Sunday tell stories of loss. The Israelites are lost, we are lost without God's mercy, a shepherd has lost a sheep, and a woman has lost a coin. By the end of each story or reading, the lost have been found. This is a fair and faithful reading of each of these texts and will lead to a fine sermon should you engage the texts this way. But as I read these texts again, I am struck by another aspect of them; particularly, the ways in which each text engages with images of the identity of God and God's people. In the Exodus reading, as Moses is lost up on the mountain and as the people are lost in the wilderness, they also lose sight of how it is God calls them to worship. As the people have lost sight of their covenantal promises to God, God loses sight of God's covenant promise to the people, telling Moses that God's wrath will burn hot against the people. It is Moses who re-directs God's anger by reminding God of both who God is and who God's people are. Moses reminds God that God is a liberator, bringing the people out of Egypt and saving them at the Red Sea. Moses reminds God that these people are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and that God is a promise-keeper who has promised descendants and land to these people. God's anger is averted. God is restored to the commitment of relationship with God's people through a reminder of God's identity. This leads—in the verses following this pericope—to the restoration of the people through reminders of who they are in relation to the identity and action of God.

As I read our gospel lesson, the framing of these stories as tales of identity shape my reading. In describing the actions

of the shepherd and the woman in these two parables, Jesus calls upon a more universal human identity. He begins by questioning who would not go after one lost sheep or search frantically for one lost coin, suggesting these actions are an obvious part of our human identity. Further, the response to finding one sheep or one coin points to another aspect of the identity of these people in the parables. There is great rejoicing and parties thrown for the return of this one sheep and the recovery of this one coin. Jesus then avers that these actions and responses reflect the identity of God, affirming the visions of God as merciful and restorative asserted by the psalmist and author of First Timothy. Our readings today can point us toward the ways in which our found-ness, our salvation, is rooted in reminders of our identity and in the merciful, just, and extravagant nature of God.

Pastoral Reflection

The most ridiculous thing about Jesus' assertion in the gospel of Luke is that the actions of the shepherd with the lost sheep and woman with the lost coin are normal. While he acts like any good shepherd would go after one sheep and any smart woman would search for one coin, the reality of the matter is very few of us would exert much energy to save one out of a hundred (or even one out of ten!). This clues me into one thing Jesus does in these parables: highlights the differences between our actions in this work and our identity in the kingdom of God. While doing so, he paints a vision of how it is—born out of our baptismal identity—that we are called to be by God.

This slight re-framing of these parables moves my imagination from the lost-ness of the sheep and coin to the extravagant response of the shepherd and woman. Rather than imagining myself as the lost sheep or lost coin, I am imagining the body of Christ on earth as the foolish shepherd and the diligent woman, living out our call through the cross of Christ to go to the places in the world where all seems lost to proclaim the abundant life of God. The danger and inefficiency of this call makes our identity as the people of God firmly counter-cultural. Like the Israelites wandering in the desert, in our own world we are too quick to create idols out of anything that we can: power, money, guns, political affiliation, etc. These idols—places where we put our ultimate trust and loyalty—demand from us a different way of responding to loss in our world. Instead of foolishly, diligently, and inefficiently seeking out the places in our world where people have been forgotten, we hear from these idols to protect and justify the power systems of the world.

I write this one week after the devastating school shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, as our country continues to mourn the loss of nineteen children and two teachers. This loss of life is added to the racially motivated

loss of life at the Tops Market in Buffalo, New York, just a few weeks earlier. The idols we worship in this world are telling us that this loss is inevitable; that there is little we can do to protect children, teachers, and BIPOC people from mass shootings. I trust that God's anger is firmly directed at us as we worship these idols, excusing the death we see as inevitable in our world. Yet, these readings remind us that this is not who we are. We are the people of a liberating and merciful God whose claim on each of us calls us toward foolish and extravagant actions that bring life to people who have been lost by our worldly idols.

Peter Carlson Schattauer

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 18, 2022

Amos 8:4–7

Psalm 113

1 Timothy 2:1–7

Luke 16:1–13

Engaging the Texts

In her book *Short Stories by Jesus*, Amy-Jill Levine gives us some tips on reading Jesus' parables. She points out that the titles we know for these parables often guide our interpretation of the stories, focusing our attention on the characters who make it into the title.⁷ Taking Levine's advice, as I read this week's parable—commonly known as the Parable of the Dishonest Manager—I wondered if a different title could influence my attention.

As the parable opens with “There once was a rich man...,” I wonder how I might engage this story differently if I focused on the actions of the rich man. The rich man is initially upset that the manager is squandering his property. My assumption is that the manager is acting in some way that is losing money at the expense of the rich man. I am surprised, then, by the rich man's reaction to the manager's response to the request for an accounting of property. The manager ends up forgiving parts of the debts of the debtors of the rich man. I would expect—assuming that he is looking to make as much money as possible off his holdings—the rich man to respond negatively to this. But his response is to commend that dishonest manager for acting shrewdly. My assumption about the rich man's criterion for what it means to squander property must be wrong because, in both these instances, he is losing money. However, he threatens after the initial acts and

7. Amy-Jill Levine. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: Harper One, 2015) 30–31.

praises after the subsequent acts. Perhaps his concern is not for his own bottom line, but for his tenants and those who owe him money to be treated justly.

The paired reading from Amos can help to support this view as the prophet chastises those who sell less than the apparent volume of a product or overcharge their customers. While we do not know the exact actions of the dishonest manager, the rich man's praise for the forgiveness of debt suggests to me that the manager's first actions involved abuse of his power over the rich man's tenants and debtors. He is chastised when he cheats those below him and praised when he re-distributes the wealth of the rich man, who has enough. The vision of the kingdom of God that we hear this day is one that challenges our criteria that more value and more production are always better. Instead, we hear that in the kingdom of God, justice and mercy toward those with less will be the criterion by which good management is determined.

Pastoral Reflection

Seemingly building on our readings from last week, this week's readings eviscerate one of the greatest idols of our modern society: wealth and the systems that support the creation and building of capital. This parable also reminds me that our perspective as we read hugely influences how it is that we read stories and the lessons that we take from them. But from whatever perspective we read this story, we are confronted with the final admonishment: "You cannot serve God and wealth." This evisceration of the idol of wealth accumulation might read more like law than gospel as almost all of us, in some way, depend on the systems of capital to live our lives. We have mortgages, we make contributions to our retirement accounts, or we invest money in the stock market. We can become singularly focused on these things: obsessing over the property value of our home, checking our retirement accounts to make sure we will have enough in our later years, or watching the economic markets. We can come to believe that our lives will be great once we have enough equity in our home to do that remodel, once we can comfortably retire, or once we can take that vacation. We believe that our value and the values of others around us are tied to our homes, our accounts, and our accumulated wealth. We excuse, or fail to learn, the ways in which this system of wealth accumulation excludes and harms people who are not able to buy-in and, instead, support the system through their need to borrow more than they can.

But the good news comes to us today with the reminder that the kingdom that Jesus preaches doesn't come about through our striving, but through the transformation of the world by God's action, allowing us to give up the idols to which we cling, like wealth, in favor of other ways to measure value. It is a reminder that, while we are called by God to live

in this world, we are not called to fully ascribe to the ways of this world that bring harm to the least among us. Instead, we are called to name the idols of the world that draw us from God and, through Spirit-guided action, provide glimpses of the kingdom of God in the here and now. As I prepare to preach these texts, I am thinking about the things in my life or in the life of my community where I place values. I am also thinking about the assumptions I make about how things must inevitably work. I am wondering about how it is that God calls me: to notice my assumptions and perspective and to be challenged by the free grace of God toward righteous relationship and action, bringing the kingdom of God closer.

Peter Carlson Schattauer

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 25, 2022

Amos 6:1a, 4–7

Psalm 146

1 Timothy 6:6–19

Luke 16:19–31

Engaging the Texts

This parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke has a framework something like contemporary jokes that begin with a person dying and meeting St. Peter at the gates of heaven. Neither Jesus' parable, nor our own jokes and cartoons, are about what heaven is like. Rather, they are about thinking we will never have to face up to how we have lived. That our privilege is forever.

Here's a joke that makes a similar point:

A rich tycoon profited from hostile corporate takeovers. He often evicted people from their Manhattan apartments to make way for his building projects and was known for his ruthless firing policies. He cheated on his income taxes, had little concern for the safety and welfare of his employees, and was concerned only that his profit margin was maximized. He dismissed anyone who tried to solicit his goodwill on behalf of the poor.

The only remotely charitable act this man ever did was early in his career and it was accidental—a by-product of his self-serving, impatient nature. On his way to a corporate takeover meeting, he gave a paper boy a dollar bill for a 50-cent newspaper. As the boy fumbled to fish out 50 cents in change, the man said, "Idiot boy! You're wasting my time. Just keep it."

When the tycoon died, he found himself at the pearly gates. He swaggered up to St. Peter and said, "Well, here I am."

"Hold on just a second, sir," replied St. Peter. He studied what was written in his book. "It seems you've been a pretty

greedy fellow all your life. You've run people out of their homes. You've conned the poor out of what little they have. You've lied for your own gain more often than you've ever told the truth. You've made life miserable for everyone with whom you've had contact. Now, in light of all that, can you think of one reason why I should let you into this holy place?"

The man considered. He'd always had the upper hand in a negotiation, and this one was for all the chips. "Well, once I gave a paper boy a dollar for a 50-cent newspaper and told him to keep the change."

St. Peter scratched his chin as he puzzled over this. "I'd better run this one past God. Wait right here."

The tycoon waited for what seemed an eternity. Finally, St. Peter returned, reached for the man's hand, and put something into it.

"What's this?" the man asked, staring at two quarters.

"The Lord said to give you your change and tell you to go to hell!"

The story of the rich man and Lazarus, as well as jokes like this one, are *cautionary tales* told to warn us that the way we live *now* matters. In the story Jesus tells, things don't turn out well for the privileged character, who is more similar to most of us than Lazarus is.

Yet, the parable shows us that, while the chasm may be fixed at death between those who suffered in life and those who "had it all and kept it for themselves," thanks be to God that we still live. That there is yet time to bridge that chasm.

The teaching in this parable is clear: Hardness of heart in the face of relievable human misery utterly and completely separates us from God and from the kingdom of heaven not just at the Day of Judgment, but now, in this life.

Pastoral Reflections

So where is grace? Are those of us who live comfortably—maybe not due to individual insatiable greed but who nonetheless profit off the built-in inequities of our society—are we damned?

It's important you don't let yourself or your parishioners off too quickly on this one. Wealth and privilege, greed and self-deception ("I earned it. I deserve it."), are taken very seriously in the Bible. They're classic soul stealers. Jesus and the prophets don't hold back on pointing out how easily God's people seem able to justify these inequities.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made clear in his 1955 sermon "The Impassable Gulf" that, while Jesus warned that wealth is dangerous, there is nothing inherently vicious about wealth. As there is nothing inherently virtuous about poverty. If there is a hell, King warned, there will be plenty of poor folks in it. But—and this is important—the possessor of wealth has a rich *opportunity*. And not to see or act upon that opportunity is a great sin.

King notes the rich man's sins to be:

- His self-love. His self-centeredness blinded him so that he never really *saw* Lazarus.
- Thus, the rich man lost the capacity to sympathize. He could look at people crushed by the battering rams of circumstances and not be moved.
- Finally, the rich man's worst and most far-reaching sin was that he accepted those inequalities of circumstance as being the proper conditions of life. This is where King is on to something in the gospel that *really* challenges us.

King sees the gulf dividing the rich man and Lazarus in life as circumstantial. Neither personally created that gulf. But the sin of the rich man was in changing the "is-ness" of that gulf into the "ought-ness" of it as a universal structure. Believing this is the way things are and therefore the way they should be.

In this context, the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man works like a flashing warning sign meant for our good, our eternal good. Here! Jesus says. I'm giving you another chance to give up hard-heartedness!

Surely, that is grace.

And that kind of grace is everywhere in today's texts.

It's in the Amos text that lets fly on lives of luxury and ease that give no thought to those who are ruined. So, think again about those who suffer—and why they do!

It's in Psalm 146, that points to the mortality of rulers whose grand plans perish with them. So, think again about where to place your trust! God is all about lifting up those who are bowed down; and wickedness will not have the last word.

It's in the first letter to Timothy, where those who want to be rich become trapped by senseless and harmful desires that only bring destruction. So, think again about what it is you really want! Yes, be rich—not in things, but in good works.

Think again. Give up hard-heartedness. Take hold of life that really is life.

Susan Thomas



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