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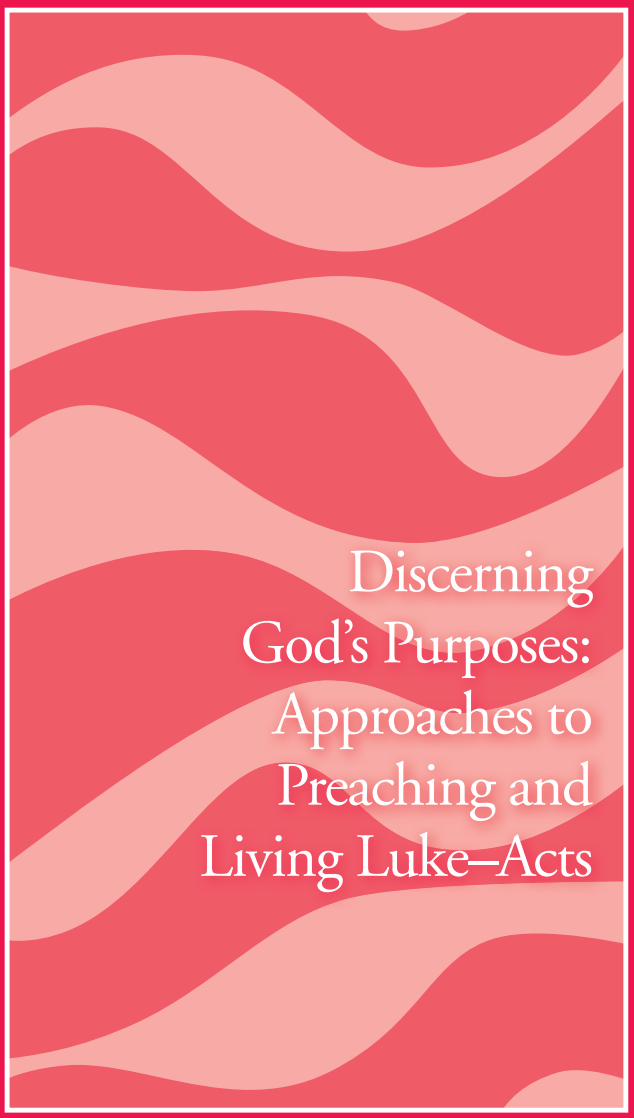

Discerning God's Purposes: Approaches to Preaching and Living Luke–Acts

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Discerning God's Purposes: Approaches to Preaching and Living Luke–Acts

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the crowds: "I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." The narrator then remarks:

> And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves (7:28-30).

This is one of several passages in Luke-Acts which signal that God is doing something new through the prophet from Nazareth, and yet it is emphasized throughout that his ministry of proclaiming and enacting the kingdom of God was foretold by and in continuity with Israel's Scriptures. Characters in Luke-Acts wittingly and unwittingly either align themselves with or reject the "purpose of God" disclosed in Scripture and in this narrative about Jesus and his earliest followers. Those who read or hear it are invited to discern for themselves how God is at work both in these "people who have been turning the world upside down," (Acts 17:6) and in the context of their own lives and world. This two-volume account of the mission of Jesus and the church prompts its audiences to look for the divine presence and purpose not at the periphery of society, but rather among the marginalized where the Spirit is always ever restoring life.

The contributions to this volume of *Currents in Theology and Mission* explore different ways of approaching Luke-Acts and, indeed, other biblical texts with a view to ascertaining how and where God is at work in the world, and how the Spirit might involve us. However, the articles are more interested in equipping and empowering others to interpret and discern for themselves than in providing definitive readings. In the first article **Audrey West** provides guidance about how to preach the parables in Luke. After surveying different approaches to the parables, she proposes a way of reading that considers the socio-cultural contexts of Jesus and the evangelists, and focuses on how Luke's narrative and theological emphases are reflected in and carried out by the parables. West takes a closer look at the parable of the leaven in Luke 13:20-21 and the parable of the widow and the judge in Luke 18:1-8. She provocatively suggests that leaven represents a "contaminating" element fundamental to the reign of God in which outcasts are welcomed and the world's assumptions about who and what has value are challenged.

David Balch begins his article by noting the ELCA's approval of the Social Statement on "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" this past summer and explores the theme of acceptance and boundary crossing in Luke-Acts. He makes a connection between

Jesus' proclamation of "the year of the Lord's acceptance (*dekton*)" in Luke 4:19 and Peter's words to Cornelius in Acts 10:35 that "in every nation anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable (*dektos*) to [God]." Both passages invoke Isaiah 61:1, and Balch shows that God's crossing ethnic boundaries announced by Isaiah is a recurring theme in Luke-Acts and a practice exemplified by Jesus and Philip with Samaritans and institutionalized by Peter who baptizes the pagan Cornelius. Balch reads Luke-Acts against the backdrop of Greco-Roman historiography and suggests that Luke is selectively *Romanizing* the people of God, changing God's people from ethnocentric (as in Athens, Sparta, and Jerusalem) to multiethnic (as in Rome). In this respect Luke's account of history is oriented not just to the past, but also to the eschatological present in which God is doing something new.

Ray Pickett reads the Gospel of Luke as a counter-narrative that sets the divine beneficence and healing mediated through Jesus in contrast to an experience of imperial society. He emphasizes the depiction of Jesus as a prophet who challenges the way Greco-Roman society works and who teaches and exemplifies an alternative way of life. The key themes of salvation and the restoration of Israel and the nations introduced in the first two chapters of Luke are developed in terms of an ongoing process of transformation that involves characters in the story as well as auditors in new patterns of living and relating. In addition to the programmatic Nazareth sermon in Luke 4, Pickett emphasizes Jesus' challenge to the reciprocity ethic that kept people beholden and submissive. In its place, Jesus teaches his followers to release one another from debt and obligation so as to embody the beneficence and mercy of God in their dealings with one another. Many of the scenes in the Gospel of Luke serve to depict an economy of the kingdom of God.

In "Turning the World Upside Down," **Edgar Krentz** highlights a number of structural, literary, and theological features of Luke-Acts that can be investigated by preachers as they live and work with Luke throughout year C. He underlines the importance of the prologue in Luke 1:1-4 as an introduction to both the Gospel and Acts. According to Krentz, Luke-Acts stresses the mission to the Roman world. He observes that Peter and Paul, the protagonists of Acts, were both taken out of their normal environment and traveled to places that challenged their culture and mores. That is an insight worth pondering as the church and its leaders read and proclaim Luke with an eye and a heart toward mission. He shows how Luke 4:16-30 anticipates many of the motifs in Luke-Acts, and emphasizes that any use of Luke-Acts should stress Luke's missionary interest. This missionary interest is, in Luke's perspective, inextricably bound to a corresponding interest in the marginalized. Krentz makes an interesting suggestion at the end of his article that takes seriously the tradition that Luke was a physician. In antiquity that was not such an honored position as it is today, and many doctors were slaves. It might be an interesting thought experiment to read and preach through Luke-Acts mindful of the possibility that the author was a slave.

In his article on the Sermon on the Mount, **Jack Lundbom** reviews a history of interpretations, including Luther, that emphasize the difficulty of fulfilling its ethical demands. He then asks the question, "how lofty is the sermon, and is there any hope at all of living by the teachings it contains?" Lundbom highlights Jesus' teaching at the end of the sermon in 7:21-27 that underlines the connection between hearing and doing, and assumes that people are expected to put his teachings into practice. He

then sets some of the antitheses in the sermon in their cultural context that renders them more doable. In concluding he acknowledges the tension between what Jesus expects and what we actually do and suggests that the Sermon on the Mount is meant to stretch us.

In the final article, **Mark Bartusch** reads the story of Jeremiah and Hananiah in Jeremiah 28 in the light of social-science models as a story of prophetic conflict. He suggests that what is at stake between Hananiah and Jeremiah is not some abstract theological principle, but honor. The context for the exchange between Jeremiah and Hananiah is a crisis of prophetic leadership in Judah and Jerusalem in the sixth century that needs to be resolved in order to restore order to the threatened community. Bartusch sees the book of Jeremiah as a stage along the way toward the development of the notion of "false prophesy." What was at issue is the impact of truth-telling and lying on the social order and solidarity. The biblical writer wrote to defend the honor and integrity of Jeremiah.

Raymond Pickett

Preparing to Preach the Parables in Luke

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Jesus proclaimed the good news of God by frequently using figurative forms of speech, which the Synoptic Gospels call "parable" (Gk. *parabolē*). Matthew, following Mark, suggests that Jesus taught *only* in parables, so that "[w]ithout a parable he told them nothing" (Matt 13:34; cf. Mark 4:33-34).[1] Further, although the word *parabolē* never appears in the Gospel of John, nor do any of the stories that we most associate with the term, much of Jesus' speech in John takes a similar form, such as "I am the vine, you are the branches" (John 15:5) or "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11).

The parables were not easy for people to understand; Jesus' disciples had to ask, on more than one occasion, for an explanation of what he meant (e.g., Mark 4:10-13 and pars.; Mark 7:17).[2] This comes as no surprise, perhaps, to anyone who has ever tried to make sense of the parable of the unjust steward, for example, in which a manager who engages in dishonest behavior seems to be commended as an example for Jesus' followers (Luke 16:1-12). As I teach the parables at synodical and congregational events during this season of the ELCA Book of Faith initiative, I find that people have no difficulty naming their favorite parable (often a tie between the good Samaritan and the prodigal son), but when asked what these parables mean, they hesitate before suggesting general moral principles: "We should be kind to other people" and "God loves me." While these are not bad sentiments, and they are certainly true, they hardly reflect the powerful and provocative impact the parables have had on Jesus' followers through the generations.

The upcoming lectionary cycle (Year C) offers preachers a number of opportunities to engage the parables in the proclamation of the gospel. Depending on what forms qualify as parables (I will say more about this below) there are between ten and fourteen Sundays in Year C that include parable texts from the Gospel of Luke. Nine of these parables, nearly all of them unique to Luke, occur in the Season after Pentecost (Ordinary Time), when our Gospel readings follow Jesus and the disciples on the journey toward Jerusalem.

In this essay I discuss several issues related to the study of the parables: parable types, methodological questions, Luke's Gospel as a context for interpretation, etc. Following this general overview, I offer a brief analysis of two parables from the Gospel of Luke: the yeast (Luke 13:20-21) and the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). My intention is to model some of the exegetical and interpretive strategies

1. Luke omits this statement about Jesus' preaching and teaching style, but includes more parables than any of the other Gospels. Except where noted, I use the NRSV translation throughout this essay.

2. The disciples have as much trouble understanding Jesus' discourse about the gate, gatekeeper, and shepherd in John chapter 10, as they do the parables in Mark 4:10-13 and pars. Barbara E. Reid, *Parables for Preachers: Year A* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 3.

that preachers might use as they prepare to preach the parables. Although the bulk of the discussion concerns the Gospel of Luke, much of what I suggest here can be applied to the other Gospels as well. The essay closes with a few concluding remarks on the value of the parables for proclamation.

What is a parable?

Two of the most well-known parables—the prodigal son and the good Samaritan—appear only in the Gospel of Luke. Surprisingly, perhaps, neither story is explicitly identified in the text as a parable, although several other of Jesus' sayings do receive that designation within their Lukan setting, namely, the great dinner (Luke 14:15-24), the widow and the judge (Luke 18:1-8), the pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). The first parable in Luke's narrative is a maxim that many people would not consider to be a parable at all, even though Jesus explicitly calls it that: "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb (lit. parable), 'Doctor, cure yourself!'" (Luke 4:23). This diversity of forms, ranging from extended narratives to short maxims, leads to disagreement in the scholarly literature about what constitutes a parable.

The Gospel writers use the Greek word *parabolē* (etymologically related to *paraballō*, "to put beside," or "to compare") to identify four distinct types of sayings material, all of which occur in Luke. Parables of the first type tend to be relatively short; they would fit easily on a postcard or within the space allotted for a Facebook status update. These are proverbs or maxims, such as the one cited above ("Doctor, cure yourself") or "No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise, the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old" (Luke 5:36). They have the character of wisdom sayings, general truths that could apply across time and circumstance, such that they could be placed into almost any narrative context.

The second type of parable is a statement of likeness (or *similitude*), typically used in phrases that begin, "the kingdom of God is like…" (e.g., the mustard seed, Luke 13:19)[3]. These are comparisons in which a familiar aspect of common life (e.g., "a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden") is compared to a less familiar aspect of God's reign. The third type is allegory, such as we encounter in the sower (Luke 8:4 and pars), where Jesus gives an explicit interpretation of each element in the parable (Luke 8:11ff). The last and most familiar type of parable has the form of a narrative or short story. Nearly all of the parables that are unique to Luke fall into this last category.

Apart from identifying the specific forms in which parables occur, we might also ask about their purpose. According to C. H. Dodd, one of the pioneers in modern parable research, the purpose of the parables is to get us to think. "A parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."[4] Dodd's classic definition remains in use today by many of the recent publications in parable research.

3. This type of parable is common in Matthew but not in the other Gospels. Luke does not explicitly identify this type as a parable, but Matthew and Mark do (e.g., Matt 13:31; Mark 4:30).

4. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 16.

What do we interpret, and how?

One methodological question (among several!) facing every treatment of the parables is this: should the parables be interpreted as they appear in their specific Gospel contexts, or, rather, should they be separated from the theological overlays of the Gospel(s) in an attempt to get back to what Jesus actually said?[5] This is not a question unique to parable studies, of course, as it stands also at the center of research into the historical Jesus. Two (among many) treatments of the parables, each of which offers provocative interpretations that may fuel faithful preaching, represent different answers to this question.

John R. Donahue suggests that the best way to understand the parables is to view them as "a Gospel in miniature," such that "[t]o study the parables of the Gospels is to study the gospel in parable."[6] That is, each parable is best understood when it is heard in concert with the theological emphases of the Gospel in which it appears. Consequently, Donahue begins his study by placing each parable squarely within its immediate and specific literary context. This methodological move suggests, for instance, that when the three parables in Luke 15 (lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal son) are read in series, there is an intensification of the experience of loss. One drachma out of ten represents a loss greater than one sheep out of 100, and the loss of a son is even greater than these. Further, the juxtaposition of a shepherd seeking a sheep with a woman seeking a coin challenges "the hearers to see the searching woman as a metaphor for God's searching love, which paves the way for a new way of thinking about how God acts toward the sinner and the outcast."[7] Consequently, the joy at finding what was lost, which is expressed in the first two parables, is echoed and intensified in the third, with the net result that "the relationship [for both sons] as redefined by the father leads to life and joy."[8] Donahue has much more to say about the prodigal son and other parables unique to Luke, as well as parables found in Matthew and Mark, and his approach is useful for the preacher who wants to reflect on theological implications of the parables within their Gospel contexts.

In *Parables as Subversive Speech*, William R. Herzog II takes a very different methodological approach from that of Donahue. He agrees with Donahue that the parables as they appear in their narrative settings in the Gospels serve "the theological and ethical concerns of the

5. For recent studies that interpret the parables within their Gospel contexts, see Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: a Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); John Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels: History and Allegory* (New York: Crossroad, 1985). For attempts to discern the "original" words of Jesus behind the Gospel accounts, see Charles W. Hedrick, *Many Things in Parables: Jesus and his Modern Critics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004); Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989). For an accessible account of modern parable research along with reading strategies for the parables, see David W. Gowler, *What are they Saying about the Parables?* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2000).

6. John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Fortress, 1988), ix.

7. Ibid., 149. Donahue also notes that the inclusion of a woman in the series reflects Luke's interest in the roles of women in the community.

8. Ibid., 157. The discussion of the three parables appears on pp. 146-162.

evangelists,"[9] but, he is interested in a different set of questions. First, what did Jesus really say, and second, how might the parables have functioned to promote social analysis as part of a teaching program that "dealt with dangerous issues, which always means political and economic issues"?[10] Using the historical-critical methods of form criticism and redaction criticism, Herzog excises the parables from their Gospel contexts in order to discern their "original" form as they might have been spoken by Jesus. Then, building on insights gleaned from the work of Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Herzog attempts "an experiment" to explore how these reconstructed parables might have "worked" to teach peasants and the rural underclass of Palestine to recognize and resist the systems of oppression and exploitation that were arrayed against them.[11] An educational program of this sort, Herzog posits, can explain why Jesus would have been crucified as a political subversive.[12] A synopsis of even one of the interpretations offered by Herzog would require more space than is available here, except to say that in nearly every case the end result provides the careful reader with an opportunity to experience the "shock value" that parables might have evoked in their first hearers.

The strategy that I follow in the interpretations offered below draws on methodological approaches that seek to discern the world "behind" the text, in the historical, social, and cultural settings of Jesus and of the evangelists, and also the world "within" the text, with a focus on how Luke's narrative and theological emphases are at once reflected in and carried out by the parables. Since my goal in this essay is to support and enhance the proclamation of the parables in the context of the church's worship, it will be important, too, to consider how these parables might be heard as we stand "in front of" the text, in the varieties of contexts in which the Gospel is preached today. I begin by setting a theological context for the parables that appear in Luke's Gospel.

Theological history and God's good news

Whenever I teach the Gospels, whether in a seminary class, a clergy continuing education event, or a lay education program, I ask participants to read one Gospel, all the way through, without stopping. The exercise is designed to remind us of at least two things. First, that each Gospel is different and, second, by extension, that the Gospel writers care passionately about how best to convey the good news of Jesus Christ and his identity and mission as God's son. That is, it matters how the story is told. This detail is easy to forget,

9. William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 3.

10. Ibid., 27.

11. Ibid., 7.

12. Ibid., 9. Herzog makes clear that he is not suggesting the Jesus was a first-century version of Paulo Freire, and he recognizes the significant differences between their respective historical settings, cultural influences, and ideological commitments. "Given these striking differences, it would simply be asking too much to require either figure to speak with the other's voice or to expect them to be engaged in the same activity at two different periods of time" (*Subversive Speech,* 17). Nor is Herzog claiming a methodology that is suitable to all of the parables; he acknowledges that some of them simply do not fit within his proposed strategy of "using the pedagogy of a modern educator, Paulo Freire, for understanding the parables of an ancient rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth" (*Subversive Speech,* 7).

especially during Advent and Christmas, when Luke's shepherds and Matthew's sages stand together at the manger in Sunday school pageants around the country, while an off-stage narrator proclaims, "In the beginning was the Word!"

Chancel dramas aside, the author we call "Luke" is the only Gospel writer to open his work with a prologue that sounds very much, in grammar, style, and vocabulary, like the prefaces to Greco-Roman historical writings of the period: he has done research ("investigated everything carefully from the very first," v. 3), he cites his sources ("eyewitnesses and servants of the word," v. 2), and he acknowledges the existence of prior works (v. 1, "orderly account," Gk. *diēgēsis* = narrative). Like a scholar who has received a research grant, Luke offers his own "orderly account" to a patron, "Most Excellent Theophilus," whose name means "God-lover." Whether Theophilus refers to a specific person, perhaps a Roman official, or whether it serves as a general term for all of Luke's readers is uncertain. In any case, Luke's stated purpose (v. 4) is "so that you may know the truth (Gk. *asphaleia* = security) concerning the things about which you have been instructed" (Gk. *katēcheō*, cf. Acts 18:25, referring to Christian catechesis).

Although the prologue sounds like it belongs to a historiographic work, the emphasis of the Gospel is decidedly theological. Luke intends to produce a narrative that his readers can trust concerning "the events that have been fulfilled among us" (v. 1), that is, those things that God has accomplished among them. This is not a news reporter's unbiased account, but rather an attempt to connect events to the greater purposes of God.

We need not read much further into Luke's Gospel to learn that the proclamation of God's good news is central to this narrative. The first event to be narrated after the prologue is Gabriel's appearance to Zechariah, in which the angel announces, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news" (Luke 1:19). "Good news" in Luke is never a noun; it always appears in its verbal form, *euangelizō*, "to preach the good news." When Jesus makes his first public appearance in the synagogue, he stands to read from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news (*euangelizō*,) to the poor" (Luke 4:18). Not much later, Jesus announces that the purpose for which he was sent is "to proclaim good news" (*euangelizō*, Luke 4:43). For Luke the gospel is an event—specifically, a preaching event—and not simply a body of knowledge or a doctrinal statement of faith; it is the proclamation of what God has done in the past and what God is doing now and will do in the future. Luke's emphasis on proclamation suggests that the parables, in form and content, represent one of the ways that the good news is preached to those who would be followers of Jesus.

We turn now to a brief discussion of two Lukan parables: The yeast (Luke 13:20-21) and the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). I have selected these parables (one maxim and one short narrative) for the heuristic purpose of modeling interpretive strategies that a preacher might apply to other parables in Luke's Gospel. I do not intend to offer a complete exegesis, or to suggest that I have uncovered the "one, main point" of these parables.[13]

13. Early historical critics, following Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1899), sought a single point of comparison in the parables. See the discussion in Gowler, *What are they Saying*, 3-12.

Indeed, I remain convinced that any quest for the "correct" interpretation of a parable runs counter to the genre itself. The parables are rich and evocative, and in the case of narrative parables, the characters and their actions suggest many places of entry for listeners to imagine themselves as part of the story. This results in the production of multiple meanings and lends to the multivalent character of the parables themselves.

The parable of the yeast (Luke 13:20-21)

And again he said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." (Luke 13:20-21)[14]

At first glance, this parable and the one before it (the mustard seed) are simply parables of growth; just as a mustard seed "grew and became a tree," large enough for nesting birds, a bit of yeast expanded and leavened some dough. Thus, we might say, the *basileia* (kingdom, reign) of God starts small and gets bigger. This is not a bad place to begin our interpretation, but a closer look at details might fuel a sermon's potential for proclaiming the parable's good news to the congregation's situations.

Yeast (or leaven, Gk. *zumē*) is the stuff that causes bread to rise.[15] Elsewhere in the NT, the word has negative associations as a corrupting or contaminating force. For example, Jesus warns the disciples to "Beware of the yeast (*zumē*) of the Pharisees…" (Luke 12:1; cf. Mark 8:15 "and the yeast of Herod"; Matt 16:6, 11, 12, "the Pharisees and Sadducees"). After reminding the Corinthians that "a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough," (1 Cor 5:6; cf. Gal 5:9) Paul exhorts them to clean out "the old yeast," which he associates with "malice and evil," in contrast with the "unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor 5:6-8). In light of these negative associations of *zumē* in the NT, might the parable be suggesting that God's *basileia* is "leavened" by people, activities, and even a person (Jesus Christ) that do not conform to the world's standards of expectation?[16] Or, does such an interpretation press the details of the parable too far?[17] In the face of multiple interpretations, which are especially prevalent when it comes to the parables, preachers are challenged to consider which interpretation(s) will best support the faithful proclamation of the Gospel in their particular contexts.

Returning to the bread-baking image of the parable, we note that the amount of flour ("three measures") leavened by the yeast is equal to approximately 40-50 pounds, representing an enormous amount of dough to be worked by one woman: enough to feed a crowd![18] For her

14. Although this parable is not included in the Year C lectionary, it is nearly identical to Matthew's version (Matt 13:33) which appears in Year A, Proper 12 (17).

15. The leaven in this case is probably more like a natural sourdough starter than it is like the granular yeast we buy today at the grocery store.

16. So, for example, B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 328-29.

17. Hultgren believes that it does; A. Hultgren, *Parables*, 406.

18. The "three measures" of flour hints at Sarah's preparations for the three heavenly visitors who drop in on her and Abraham. She prepares cakes for the visitors from "three measures of flour" while Abraham kills a fatted calf. Although the English translation (three measures of flour) is the same, the underlying Greek in Luke and the LXX differs. Nonetheless, reading the parable with the Genesis episode in mind highlights elements of abundance and

part, the woman is "hiding" the yeast in the flour (Gk. *enkryptō* = to hide in; NRSV = mix), which suggests that the type of bread—leavened or unleavened—is not immediately obvious to anyone who is watching. It will become clear only over time, as the leaven does its work, but one can be assured that it *will* become clear. "For nothing is hidden (*kryptos*) that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light (Luke 8:17; cf. 12:2). Later in the Gospel, when Jesus tells the disciples of the fate that awaits him in Jerusalem, they are unable to grasp what he is saying, for "what he said was hidden (*kryptō*) from them" (Luke 18:34). It is only later, after the crucifixion, that they are able to understand (Luke 24:44-49); once again, what is hidden in the present will most certainly be made known. When considering the sermon on this parable, the preacher might begin by asking him- or herself a few questions: In what ways is God at work in this congregation? Where is God's activity hidden to the comprehension of the worshiping community? Might there be evidence of God's activity as close to them as a woman baking bread, if only they were able to see? How might the sermon help us to develop eyes that see the abundance of God that is before us?

One possibility for preaching is to set this parable alongside other Lukan episodes in which similar themes appear, allowing the images to build upon one another. For example, there are provocative connections between the abundance represented by the parable and the twelve baskets of bread that are left over after Jesus feeds five thousand with five loaves and a couple of fish (Luke 9:12-17). The hiddenness of the yeast at work in the flour stands in contrast to the way that Jesus is made known to the two travelers to Emmaus in the breaking of bread (Luke 24:35). The presence of a "contaminating" element fundamental to the reign of God might serve as an illustration of Jesus' welcome of the outcast and a reminder that the world's assumptions about who or what "counts" in God's reign are very often quite far from God's. The prevalence of women as active participants in the ministry of Jesus and as leading characters in some of his parables (e.g., Luke 15:8-10; 18:1-8) suggests, too, that preachers should not ignore the fact that the everyday life of a woman (bread-baker, woman who sweeps) is every bit as illustrative of the reign of God as is the everyday life of a first-century man (e.g., sower, shepherd, etc.).

The parable of the widow and the judge (Luke 18:1-8)

Before recounting Jesus' parable, Luke offers an introductory statement "about their need to pray always and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1). Prayer is thematic in Luke. The opening scene, when the angel appears to Zechariah, takes place at the Temple, while "the whole assembly of the people was praying outside" (Luke 1:10). Jesus prays at key events in his ministry—the baptism (Luke 3:21); the calling of the Twelve (Luke 6:12); the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28); in the Garden, prior to his arrest and crucifixion (Luke 22:40-46)—and he also withdraws from the crowds and sometimes from the disciples in order to pray alone (Luke 5:16; 9:18). At the disciples' request, he teaches them to pray (Luke 11:1-4). Jesus in Luke models what the parable introduction exhorts: constant and persistent prayer.

Within this context, it is noteworthy that the parable itself never explicitly

celebration, and it may open the preacher to additional homiletical possibilities. After all, both women are making bread enough for a feast.

mentions prayer. Rather, it offers a rather sparse account of a woman who bothers a corrupt judge until he grants justice to her. The preacher might consider in what ways the widow's actions are prayer. Traditional interpretations focus on her persistence, but might there be more to say? Could it be that her active pursuit of justice is itself a form of prayer, a way to remain connected to the purposes of God?

Once the parable begins, Jewish listeners would realize that the judge does not live up to his role: he "neither feared God and nor had respect for people" (Luke 18:2), a description that is confirmed by the judge's own lips just two verses later (Luke 18:4).[19] The language echoes (in reverse) the injunction to judges in 2 Chronicles 19:7—to "let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take care what you do, for there is no perversion of justice with the Lord our God, or partiality, or taking of bribes"—and of the description of God as a judge "who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow" (Deut 10:17-18). Thus, Torah commands, "you shall fear the Lord, your God," (Deut 10:20; cf. Deut 6:13; Lev 19:14, etc.). The parable's judge initially refuses to grant justice to the widow, thereby demonstrating further disregard for his role. "Any 'God-fearing' jurist would feel obliged by Torah to take special care of [the widow] (see Deut 19:18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:19-21; 26:12-13)."[20]

As for the widow, she keeps coming to the judge to seek justice. Although the parable offers almost no details about the woman or her case (perhaps a dispute concerning her deceased husband's estate), we may reasonably assume a few things. Having no husband probably means no source of support: nobody to care for her, nobody to speak on her behalf in the public arena. It is likely that she is poor, perhaps considered to be one of the "leftovers" of society.[21] Due to widows' vulnerability, Torah commands the community to leave crops for them to glean (Deut 24:19), to give a portion of the tithe for their support (Deut 26:12), and it announces a curse on anyone who deprives a widow of justice (Deut 27:19). The prophets consider care for the widow to be one element of covenantal fidelity: "[L]earn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." (e.g., Isa 1:17).

In the end, this vulnerable widow uses the limited power available to her—her voice and a relentless pursuit of justice—to bring about a change in the judge. How? By bothering him until he decides to "grant justice to her lest she wear me out (Gk. *hypōpiazō*) by continually coming." The Greek, *hypōpiazō* means, literally, to hit under the eye. It also has the figurative sense "to wear out," but I prefer the former translation, which suggests that if the widow keeps returning to the judge, she will give him a figurative "shiner," a shameful and visible sign to the community that he is not fulfilling his responsibilities as a judge.

Given these exegetical details and any others discovered during the process of exegesis, how might the preacher move from text to sermon? One way, of course, is to begin with the long-standing inter-

19. Repetition is a literary and rhetorical device that calls attention to whatever is being repeated; it functions here as the literary equivalent to a highlighter pen.

20. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 269.

21. Barbara Scheele, "Proclaiming the Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:2-5)," in *The Lost Coin: Parables of Women, Work and Wisdom*, ed. by Mary Ann Beavis (London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 62-70.

pretation of the parable, which suggests an argument from lesser-to-greater. That is, if an unjust judge will eventually grant justice to the widow, how much more will a just God give? One difficulty with this interpretation, however, is that it too easily suggests that God will only grant justice if we "keep bothering" God, that God actively resists delivering justice unless we wear God down. This is not the image of God we receive from the rest of Luke's Gospel.

An alternative way to hear the parable is to ask not only what the character of the judge teaches about God (the traditional interpretation), but what the character of the widow teaches.[22] I offer the following suggestions as a starting place for the preacher's consideration. In the face of injustice, the widow uses her vulnerability to bring about justice. This sounds very much like the God who is praised in the Magnificat who, through the birth of a vulnerable child, brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly (Luke 1:52). This is the same God whose power is revealed on a cross, where the crucified King of the Jews is declared "just" or "righteous" (Luke 23:47; Gk. *dikaios, NRSV: innocent).* Like the widow, the God revealed through Jesus Christ never gives up in the pursuit of justice. Instead, the vulnerable, persistent power of God is manifested in the life and ministry of the One who has been anointed to bring good news for *us*. Is this not a reason to have faith? (cf. 18:8).[23]

Concluding reflections

The parables remind us that the good news is often conveyed best by story: stories by Jesus, stories about Jesus, stories about the people of God today and in the past, stories that lead the people of God into the future. Preachers have an opportunity to help their congregations both to tell and to hear the many stories—biblical and otherwise—that illustrate in concrete terms the marvelous works that God is doing among God's people. In addition, the open-ended nature of parables creates a space through which we are able to enter into the stories and imagine ourselves as characters in them. From "inside" these stories we are invited to see and understand God's world in new ways, to recognize the extraordinary gifts that God offers in and through rather ordinary people and events, and to experience God's grace. The parables help us to re-shape our thinking, not by careful, philosophical argument; nor systematic discourse; nor rules; nor instructions; nor statistical analysis. Instead they invite us to rejoice with the woman who finds her coin, to persist with the widow who seeks justice, to reveal our arrogance with the Pharisee, to confess our sins with the Tax Collector, and to share in the Great Banquet with all the other outcasts, each of us welcomed into the feast only because of God's gracious invitation.

22. One way to gain a new perspective on a familiar parable is to consider the saying or story from the perspective of each of the characters within it. Another is to ask what (if anything) each character reveals to us about God? About ourselves? About the gospel?

23. My discussion of the Widow and the Judge is drawn from a more extended treatment of this parable in Audrey West, "Propers 22-29," in *New Proclamation Commentary: Year C: Easter through Christ the King*, ed. by David B. Lott (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), forthcoming.

Accepting Others: God's Boundary Crossing According to Isaiah and Luke-Acts

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Wednesday, August 19, 2009, was eventful for the ELCA, the day that delegates at the churchwide assembly in Minneapolis engaged in dialogue, amended, and voted two-thirds approval (precisely 66.67 percent) of the Social Statement on "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust."[1] For several hours, more than a thousand voting delegates gave reasons for and against, their eyes occasionally overflowing into tears while quoting the Bible. My colleague at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Herb Anderson, is now saying that he will emphasize "empathy" for each other within the church while teaching his pastoral care courses. After listening for days to all those Bible quotations, I came home and changed my course syllabi to include significant bibliography on Lutheran interpretation of the Bible.[2]

Jesus' and Peter's sermons

Interpreting the Bible (Luke 4 and Acts 10)

Jesus interprets the Bible in his inaugural sermon in Luke 4. Jesus' first sermon in Matthew (chaps. 5–7) is from the Q collection of his sayings, but Luke makes these sayings not his first, but Jesus' second sermon (6:17–49). Actually, Matthew's Sermon on the Mount begins (5:3) with a reference to the same text, Isaiah 61:1, but only Luke 4:18–19 climaxes this first sermon with the next verse, Isaiah 61:2: Jesus brings good news to the poor, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's acceptance" (*dekton*, my translation).[3]

1. Second, during the debate, a tornado passed over the Minneapolis Convention Center, blowing away items on the roof of Central Lutheran Church next door. Third, that same evening, Rev. Barbara Lundblad preached at Central Lutheran from Mark 4:35-41, Jesus in a boat when "a great windstorm arose," a lectionary text chosen long before. Three *awesome* events the same day!

2. See e.g., Gordon L. Isaac, "The Changing Image of Luther as Biblical Expositor," in *Ad fontes Lutheri: Toward the Recovery of the Real Luther: Essays in Honor of Kenneth Hagen's Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. T. Maschke, F. Posset, and J. Skocir (Marquette Studies in Theology 28; Milwaukee: Jesuit University Presses, 2001), 67-85. See also Gary M. Simpson, " 'You shall bear witness to me': Thinking with Luther about Christ and the Scriptures," *Word & World*, vol. 29/4 (2009), 380-88.

3. Jesus' inaugural sermon justifies the "acceptance" of Gentiles by appealing to scripture (Isa 61:2), *pace* Richard I. Pervo, *Acts*, *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 23-24.

The final word in the sermon, the verbal adjective *dektos,* occurs three times in Luke-Acts, twice in this story itself (see 4:24). The prophet Isaiah's words, quoted by Jesus, are then proclaimed again by the apostle Peter to Cornelius, "*in every nation* anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable (*dektos*) to him" (Acts 10:35). The prophecy from Isaiah with which Jesus climaxes his inaugural sermon is fulfilled by God's acceptance of a pagan/Roman centurion into the people of God in Acts 10, which generated significant disputes in the early church, resulting in the first church council (Acts 15).

The theme of "acceptance" in Luke-Acts:

Proclamation and crossing social/ethnic boundaries

The theme of "acceptance" is one of sixteen that biographers and historians employed and varied when telling stories of the origins of a city, ethnic group, or in Luke's story, the origin of *ekklesiai*, house churches.[4] Luke-Acts develops this theme in a number of passages that concern both God's prophesied "acceptance" of humans in all ethnic groups, passages that also pose the question of human "acceptance" of the gospel of God's acceptance. "The seed is the word of God, …and the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, accept (*dechontai*) it with joy" (Luke 8:11, 13). On the other hand, some do not accept (*dechontai*, Luke 9:5) the twelve, whom Jesus sends out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal (9:2). Whoever accepts (*dexetai*) a child in Jesus' name accepts both Jesus and the One who sent him (9:48). If towns of Samaritans (9:52) welcome/accept (*dechontai*) the seventy [-two], there will be uncomfortable social consequences for disciples accustomed to dietary restrictions: Jesus commands, "eat what is set before you" (Luke 10:8b).[5] We read later in Acts (8:14) that "Samaria had accepted (*dedektai*) the word of God, so the apostles at Jerusalem send Peter and John to them." The major conflict in Acts is announced when "the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had accepted (*edexanto*) the word of God" (11:1). Again, "these Jews [in Beroea] were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed (*edexanto*) the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so" (17:11). The scriptures they were examining would have included Isaiah 61:2.

Why do some accept the word, and some do not? The seventy[-two] traveling among *Samaritans* say, "The kingdom of God has come near to you" (10:9). Philip was also proclaiming "the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus" (Acts 8:12) in the city of *Samaria*. When "a great many of the *devout Greeks* and not a few of the *leading women" in Thessalonica* were persuaded by Paul and Silas (Acts 17:4), local Judeans rioted, so believers packed Paul off to Beroea. There, too, "*not a few Greek women and men of high standing*" believed (Acts 17:12) after examining the scriptures. In each of these cases the narrative includes both the word proclaimed and, simultaneously, the

4. This article in *Currents* is based on earlier research published as "Jesus as Founder of the Church in Luke-Acts: Form and Function," in *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse*, ed. T. Penner and C. Vander Stichele, SBLSS 20 (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 139-88; on "acceptance," 164-65.

5. Compare 1 Corinthians 10:27c, where the same Greek words appear in a different order. In certain circumstances they allow Corinthian believers to eat meat offered to Zeus. Contrast Leviticus 11:7, which forbids eating pork.

proclaimers and their auditors crossing social/religious boundaries. Isaiah had announced God's crossing ethnic boundaries, Jesus and Philip practice it with Samaritans, and Peter institutionalizes it by baptizing the pagan Cornelius. The question why some accept the word while others do not must include their responses to God's provocative, but prophesied, eschatological crossing of ethnic boundaries, boundaries guarded by powerful visual/bodily symbols/commands such as kosher food and circumcision that are enshrined in ancient scripture. This raises the question whether God is allowed to change, even in relation to inspired scripture.

The stories in Luke 10 and Acts 8 involve *Samaritans* accepting the word. The social context of both the historical Jesus and later of the evangelist Philip become clearer when we review what Josephus (Luke's contemporary) narrates about Samaritans. Josephus writes that Alexander the Great approached Jerusalem (late fourth century B.C.E.) and was shown the book of Daniel (*Antiquities* 11.337), which declares that a Greek should destroy the Persians. He supposed this Greek to be himself, Josephus tells us, and so he granted Jews in Jerusalem and those in Babylon the right to live by their own laws (11.338). He then visited the Samaritans and their metropolis, Shechem, who saw that he had honored the Jews, so they determined to profess themselves Jews. Josephus rather declares them "apostates (*apostaton*) of the Jewish nation" (11.340). "If anyone were accused by those of Jerusalem of having eaten things common, or of having broken the Sabbath, or of any other crime of the like nature, he fled away to the Schechemites…." (11.346-47) This is precisely the rumor that James reports hearing against Paul: orthopraxic believers in Jerusalem "have been told about you, that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to apostatize from Moses (*apostasian…apo Mouseos*), telling them not to circumcise their children" (Acts 21:21, my translation; compare *Ant.* 11.340).

Antiochus IV Epiphanes took Jerusalem and installed a garrison of Macedonians, but impious and wicked Jews also lived there, according to Josephus, who caused their co-citizens much suffering (*Antiquities* 12.246, 252). Antiochus built an idol altar on God's altar and offered swine, forbidding Jews to circumcise their sons, which many obeyed (12.253-55, mid-second century B.C.E.). When Samaritans witnessed this suffering, they denied they were Jews, but rather claimed to be a colony of Medes and Persians, with which Josephus agrees (12.257). Samaritans say rather that they choose to live according to the customs of the Greeks (12.263). In this context Josephus begins narrating the revolt of Mattathias the Maccabee (12.265). The conflicts concerning ethnic relationships, boundaries, inclusion and exclusion narrated in Luke-Acts are four centuries old, dating back at least to Alexander the Great; then Antiochus Epiphanes reignited these cultural/religious tensions. The Judeans' neighbors, the Samaritans, were occasionally their cultural/religious antagonists, viewed by some as "apostates," who were joined by Judeans from Jerusalem whenever they had violated key identity symbols/commandments (not keeping kosher or resting on the Sabbath) and so felt that they had to flee Jerusalem. Jesus himself entered a Samaritan village (Luke 9:51-55), told the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-29, which most interpreters conclude is authentic), and healed a Samaritan leper (Luke 17:11-16).

Acts 10:28b reveals how provocative this social/ethnic boundary crossing was: [Peter]: "You yourselves [Cornelius' household] know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile [*allophylo*]." The

noun here, typically translated "Gentile" is not the usual one (*ethnos*) and means rather "alien, foreigner, of another tribe." It occurs 290 times in Luke's Bible, the Septuagint, most often for "Philistine." For example, in 1 Sam 17, when the Hebrew has *Philistim*, the Septuagint repeatedly translates with the Greek *allophyloi*, as in 1 Sam 17:4, "And a mighty man came out from the ranks of the *allophyles*; Goliath was his name" (New English Translation of the Septuagint = NETS). Similarly, Judas Maccabeus prays, "Blessed are you, O Savior of Israel, who crushed the attack of the mighty warrior [Goliath] by the hand of your servant David, and gave the camp of the *allophyles* into the hand of Jonathan son of Saul… . Strike them down with the sword of those who love you" (1 Macc 4:30, 33 NETS). This translation of the Hebrew "Philistine" by the Greek *allophyle* is characteristic for the narratives of Samson (Judg 13–16), the ark (1 Sam 4–6), King Saul (1 Sam 9–19; 1 Chr 9–10), and David (1 Sam 17–31; 1 Chr 11–18). The *allophyles* worship idols (1 Sam 31:9) and are uncircumcised (Judg 14:3; 1 Sam 17:36-37; 2 Sam 1:20). The Lord delivers the *allophyles* to Israel (1 Sam 17:46) and saves Israel from them (2 Sam 3:18).

We do not usually realize how radical it is when the "believers from Joppa" (Acts 10:23) hear Peter characterize Cornelius as an *allophyle* and then baptize him: he is baptizing Goliath into the church! When Peter proclaims, "In *every nation anyone* who fears him and does what is right is acceptable (*dektos*) to him" (10:28), he includes the Philistines/Goliath/Cornelius! The tension with the historical books of the Hebrew Bible, as translated in the Septuagint, is so high that it takes the authority of the prophet Isaiah (61:2), emphasized by Jesus in his inaugural sermon (Luke 4:19), to legitimate God's provocative acceptance of these foreigners by Peter in the later church (Acts 10:35, 45). God inaugurates a new era of salvation history, prophesied long ago; will God's people "accept" God's acceptance of uncircumcised, pork-eating aliens? Initially, at the apostolic council as reported by both Paul (Gal 2:9) and Acts (Acts 15:10-12, 19), the Judean believers do! Conflicts are so high, however, that the agreement eventually falls apart (Acts 21:18-21; Gal 4:21-31). Tradition, enshrined in scripture, makes God's new act difficult to accept.[6] Luke is usually understood to be emphasizing the continuity of salvation history,[7] but is not the author, a Gentile believer writing to predominantly Gentile house churches, legitimating *dis*continuity (pork-eating, [and if male] uncircumcised Gentile followers of Moses who do not rest on the Sabbath), by arguing that this was prophesied?

Have Lukan house churches changed Moses' customs?

No, God prophesied acceptance, so this change is not a change!

The purpose of Luke's two volumes must be related to the "accusations" made against both Stephen and Paul.

> This man (Stephen) never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs (*allaxei ta*

6. Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 167: Paul's reading of scripture is "antithetical"; he exploits tensions within Torah, building his hermeneutic on differences, e.g., between Genesis and Exodus, Abraham and Moses. Unlike Paul, Luke is *narrating* salvation history. He must have been aware, however, that this gospel narrative presents salvation history with more discontinuity than the Maccabean literature.

7. Pervo 10, 20, 22.

> *ethe*) that Moses handed on to us (Acts 6:13-14).
>
> They (believers among the Jews) have been told about you (Paul) that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake (*apostasian*) Moses, and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs (*tois ethesin peripatein*; Acts 21:21).

Luke, writing a generation after Paul, is not primarily concerned to legitimate the "historical" Stephen and Paul, to polish their reputations. The author rather opposes rumors, doubts, being voiced perhaps both inside and outside the Lukan house churches toward the end of the first century: can we Lukan Christians, uncircumcised (if male) Gentiles, who would not know how to cook kosher even if we wanted to, really claim continuity with the ancient revelation of God through *Moses*, or have we not "changed the customs Moses handed on to us"?

From a twenty-first century point of view, the Lukan churches had obviously changed Moses. Priests in Jerusalem would never have recognized Cornelius (Acts 10), the Philippian jailer (16:27), Titius Justus of Corinth (18.7), Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia ([Ephesus] 20.4) as belonging to the people of Israel![8] For ancient historians in general, who assume that the "founder" of a city or people has given them an ideal "constitution" and laws, whether the founder was Romulus of Rome or Moses of Israel, change was very awkward, a corruption of the original divine laws. Again, from a modern historian's point of view, history brings changes, discontinuities, and they are often good! In the United States we may finally cover all with health insurance, although we dare not call this socialist. But ancient historians could not admit this, and when unwillingly they were forced to narrate change, they had to deny it was change, sometimes claiming that the original founder long ago really had said something analogous.

Dionysius, a biographer/historian who wrote during the last decade B.C.E., and Plutarch, a contemporary of Luke, both write of founders' customs.[9] Dionysius is legitimating Romulus as founder of Rome and retrojects important changes in the succeeding seven centuries back onto the original laws set out by the founder. Plutarch, however, is not legitimating the founders whose biographies he narrates and is therefore franker about founders changing laws and customs. Theseus, the founder of Athens, Plutarch narrates, did away with offices of the powerful, a change which eventually resulted in his death (Plutarch, *Theseus* 24.3; 29.2). Dionysius (*Roman Antiquities* 6.22-92) narrates the origin of the office of tribunes, established long after Romulus, but immediately inserts a digression claiming that Romans have never ever made any innovations in their laws (*Roman Antiquities* 7.70-73)![10]

The Jewish historian Josephus is forced to narrate the change from aris-

8. Priests opposed "mixing" with foreigners: Ezra 10:3, 9-15, 18-44; Neh 9:32; 13:1, 3, 23, 25, 28, 30; Ps 105[106]:35; 2 Macc 14:3, 38; Josephus, *Antiquities*. 4.148, 153, 159, etc.

9. Balch, "Jesus as Founder," 174-80. Dionysius is translated by Cary, Plutarch by Perrin, both in the Loeb Classical Library.

10. See Balch, "Political Friendship in the Historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*," in *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship*, ed. John T. Fitzgerald (SBLRBS 34; Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 123-44 and Balch, "Rich and Poor, Proud and Humble in Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks,* ed. L. M. White and O. L. Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 214-33.

tocracy (charismatic judges) to monarchy (1 Sam 8-9), which tormented the mind of the prophet Samuel (Josephus, *Antiquities* 6.36). God appears to him, comforting him saying that "it was not he (Samuel), but himself (God) whom they so insolently despised and would not have to be alone their king.... However in no long time they would sorely repent of what they did..." (6.37-38).

Similarly, just before telling of Moses descending from Sinai to deliver God's divine constitution to Israel, Josephus narrates the story of Balaam (*Antiquities* 4.102-58), who advises the Moabite king, Balak, to have beautiful, young Moabite women seduce Jewish boys. Since their customs are alien to all humanity, the women urge the boys, after they are enslaved to them (4.133), to worship their gods (4.137-40). Zambrias then calls Moses a "tyrant" (4.146), asserting that he has married a foreign wife and will sacrifice to the gods he chooses (4.148-49). Phinees, however, kills both Zambrias and his foreign wife (4.153, 159; see Num 25:1-15). Commenting on this story, Feldman suggests that Josephus may well have been directing this story against assimilation to Jewish readers who supported the agenda of Zambrias, who supported change.[11]

Growth and change?

Luke differs from Josephus: the "new" (Luke 5:36[12]; 22:20; Acts 5:20; 17:19) eschatological event being experienced in the present was prophesied long ago by Isaiah, so it is a change that is not a change. Luke is not oriented exclusively toward the past, but also to the eschatological present, in which God is doing something new. Ancient authors often commented on this new event, in which foreigners are accepted into the citizen body. Such additions would bring "growth," but negatively, "mixing" so accusations ran, would change traditional language and customs.[13] Rome grew in numbers and power by welcoming/accepting fugitives from other poorly governed cities. Ancient historians of Rome criticized the so-called wise Greeks, including Athenians, so proud that they granted citizenship to only a few, jealous of their noble Greek birth. Some, the Spartans, even expelled foreigners, but they received no advantage from this haughty attitude. The Thebans and Athenians, through the single military disaster at Chaeronea (338 B.C.E.), lost both the leadership of Greece and their freedom. But Rome's strength, due to her growth by adding strangers, was favored by Fortune (Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities* 2.17).

So also Luke: the church grows multi-ethnically by preaching the word, not by military means. Paul preaches the word boldly in Ephesus, no longer only in Jerusalem or even in Antioch, with its large, ethnically familiar population, "so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10 NRSV). Paul is victorious in conflict with some exorcists, so that "all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, everyone, was awestruck; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised" (19:17). The exorcists burn their books, and "so the word of the Lord grew (*auxano*) mightily and prevailed" (19:20).

In contrast, it was a strain for Athe-

11. Lewis H. Feldman, *Jewish Antiquities 1-4: Translation and Commentary*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 378, n. 392, commenting on Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.131.

12. But the author/editor seems rather to think, with many contemporaries, "the old is good" (Luke 5:39). Luke may be retelling Jesus' parables, who did indeed value the new.

13. See Balch, "Jesus as Founder," 165-70.

nians to combine diverse *Greek* towns, the residents of Attica, into one city (Plutarch, *Theseus* 2). Likewise, residents of Jerusalem opposed admitting foreigners and their customs (2 Macc 14:38; 1 Esd 8:87). Josephus and Luke differ in relation to this value. Contrast the following quotations of Josephus and Acts: "let there be one holy city…and let there be one holy temple therein, and one altar…For God is one and the Hebrew race is one" (Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.200-01). "From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth" (Acts 17:26; compare Eph 4:4-6). Acts, which supports a multiethnic people of God, denationalizes Josephus' formula.

Growth results from "mixing."[14] Aeneas, founder of the Roman people, finally stopped wandering when he came to the later site of the city of Rome, where he mixed the two races, native and foreign, combining their customs, laws, and religious ceremonies; these diverse nations shared a common life, the origin of Rome (Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities* 1.60.1-3). Plutarch narrates essentially the same story: Romulus sees his city filling up with aliens mixed with poor people, so he blends them and creates fellowship (*koinonia*, *Romulus* 14.2, 6). Numa, the king of Rome who followed Romulus, mixed Roman and Spartan customs. He was admired for distributing the people by trades, because they had utterly refused to become united, but were filled with contention (Plutarch, *Numa* 17.1). Numa, aware that hard substances will not readily mingle, obliterated the original distinctions, distributing the people by arts and trades into musicians, goldsmiths, carpenters, etc., and made "one" out of them all. At last he banished from the city the practice of speaking of some as Sabines, others as Romans, so that his division resulted in a harmonious mixing of them all (*Numa* 17.3-4).

14. Balch, "Jesus as Founder," 167-70.

Luke is selectively *Romanizing* the people of God, a modern historian would say, changing God's people from ethnocentric (as in Athens, Sparta, and Jerusalem) to multiethnic (as in Rome). Judeans, Samaritans, and Greeks, even *allophyles*, become one. The ancient biographer/historian Luke would insist that this is not change, but is rather an unfolding of the ancient plan of the God of Moses and the prophets, who long ago prophesied God's acceptance of all peoples (Luke 2:31-32; 17:18; 24:46-47; Acts 2:17 [Joel 3:1-5 LXX], 23; 5:38-39; 10:34-35 [Isa 61:2]; 13:46-47 [Isa 49:6]; 15:14-17 [Amos 9:11-12 LXX]; 16:10; 26:22-23; 28:28).

Founders, agents of change, die

Plutarch begins his biographies of the founders of Athens and Rome observing that in their final days they both came into conflict with other citizens (*Romulus* 27; *Numa* 22). Of the five kings who followed Numa, the last was dethroned and died in exile, but none of the other four died a natural death (Plutarch, *Numa* 22.6). The ancient writer Xenophon also observed, "all sorts of changes in government are attended by loss of life" (*thanatephoroi*, "bearers of death," *Hellenica* 2.3.32).

When John (Luke 3:3) baptizes for the forgiveness of sins and Jesus also forgives (7:48) far from the Jerusalem temple with its holy days and sacrifices (see Luke 19:45-48; 21:5-6), they announce that one experiences the transcendent somewhere other than the traditional holy place, dangerous stuff. E. P. Sanders argues that Jesus in his final days did indeed perform some action symbolizing the future apocalyptic destruction of the temple, whose import was that Jesus was "attacking the temple service commanded by God. Not

just priests would have been offended."[15] When Jesus in his inaugural sermon announces the cleansing of Naaman the Syrian leper, not of lepers in Israel (Luke 4:27; compare the grateful Samaritan leper in 17:16-18), his shift in ethnic values generates rage. Like the Samaritans whom Josephus mentions, Jesus behaves differently on the Sabbath (6:1-2, 6-7), and then he tells of a Samaritan showing mercy, in contrast to a Jerusalem priest and a Levite (10:25-37), not a story to make the audience comfortable. He revalues economic class, challenging those who assert their own status (6:20-26; 12:13-21; 14:13; 18:25), reversing highly symbolic eating customs: the master promises to serve reclining slaves (12:35-38). He criticizes Judean (11:37-54; 18:11-12) and Roman (13:31-32) authorities. As North Americans know, reevaluating "family values" would also generate controversy (14:25-26). Any one of these might get a leader killed (see 22:1-2), as happened in the assassination of transformative leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. (1968), Bishop Óscar Romero (1980), Anwar al-Sadat (1981), and Yitzhak Rabin (1995).

After change, after death, some leave town; they are "sent out"

The crisis that evokes a "going out" may be a famine (Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities* 1.27.3) or "sending" away some who tend to rebel (*Roman Antiquities* 1.85.2). In Acts the sending out is connected to the heightening of conflict in a revolutionary context. After the apostles do signs and wonders (Acts 5:12-16), they are arrested by the high priest (5:17). Gamaliel, a Pharisee, compares the situation to that of Theudas' and later Judas the Galilean's uprising (5:36-37). This pattern is repeated three times in Acts 3–7,[16] after which "a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered (*diesparesan*) throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria" (8:1bc). Further, "Those who were scattered (*diasparentes*) because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch…, but…on coming to Antioch [they] spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus" (11:19ab, 20bc). Pervo (96) perceptively observes, "henceforth, persecution will drive the plot of Acts." As my reference above to King, Romero, Sadat, and Rabin indicate—preceded by Xenophon's ancient observation that such social change is a bearer of death—persecution and death are more than an entertaining plot in Acts, but at some level are social history generated by social-political-religious change, initiated by Jesus and implemented by early followers, in Acts primarily by crossing traditional ethnic boundaries, while claiming the support of biblical prophecies. In Greco-Roman society those "sent out" would establish colonies, but in Luke-Acts they establish rather houses (Luke 10:5; 19:9; Acts 2:46; 8:3; 11:14; 16:15, 31; 18:8; 20:20) and churches (Acts 8:3; 9:31; 15:3, 41; 20:28).

God's character in Luke-Acts

Given that Luke-Acts is legitimating prophesied *dis*continuity, who is God? Luke announces crucial aspects of God's character in the Magnificat (1:46-55). A

15. E. P. Sanders, "Jesus and the Temple," in *The Historical Jesus in Recent Researc*h, ed. J.D.G. Dunn, 361-81 and S. McKnight (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), reprinted from E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (1985), 61-76.

16. See Pervo, *Acts* 97 on this "pattern of cult foundation."

distinctive cluster of terms signals God's acts: humility (*tapeinosis*, 1:48), slave woman (1:48), proud (*uperephanous*), powerful (1:51-52), exalt the humble (*hupsosen tapeinous,* 1:52), rich (1:53). Mary is a humble slave woman, and God exalts the humble; in contrast, God humbles the proud, powerful, and rich. Strikingly, Paul employs a similar cluster of terms in the Philippians hymn: slave (2:7), humbled (*tapeinoo*) himself (2:8), God highly exalted (*uper-hypsoo*) him (2:9), heaven and earth (2:10). In the Philippians hymn now Christ, not Mary, humbles himself, takes the form of a slave, whom God then exalts, so that every knee on heaven and earth bends. To return to Luke-Acts, Peter's sermon inaugurating the church employs a similar cluster of terms, again Christological, which rely more on spatial, vertical, high/low imagery than on a chronological timeline: slaves, both men and women (2:18, quoting Joel 3:1-5 LXX), heaven and earth (Acts 2:19), Hades (2:27 and 31, quoting Psalm 15:8-11 LXX), exalted (*hypsoo*, 2:33), at God's right hand (2:33-34; compare 5:31), heavens (2:34). God will pour out God's Spirit on "my slaves, both men and women," with signs in heaven above and earth below; not even Hades can corrupt God's Holy One, who is rather exalted at God's right hand, has ascended into the heavens. So the cluster of terms narrates what God had done for Mary and also (in Phil 2 and Acts 2) God's acts in relation to Jesus Christ and the church. Finally, Luke employs this cluster of terms ethically: rich (Luke 16:19, 21), poor (16:20, 22), with Abraham (16:22-26), Hades (16:23), a great chasm (16:26). Without employing the terms humble and exalt, this parable nevertheless verbally represents God's reversal of the situations of rich and poor, the poor to Abraham's bosom, the rich to Hades, as in the Magnificat, Peter's inaugural, ecclesiastical sermon, and the Philippians hymn.

Luke's Greco-Roman readers/auditors were familiar with this cluster of terms.[17] In Rome poverty revolts against wealth (*penia pros plouton*), the humble against the eminent (*tapeinotes pros epiphaneian*); in nearly all states, the lower class is generally hostile to the upper (Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities* 6.54.1). These two groups are contrasted as "the arrogant" (*oi uperephanoi*, 6.72.3) and "the humble" (*oi tapeinoi*, 6.76.2). The senators are "unwilling to associate (*akoinoneta*) as fellow-citizens and to share their blessings with those of humbler estate" (*tapeinoterous*, 6.80.4). The poorer citizens need their debts forgiven (*apheisthai ton ophlematon*, 6.83.4, the same verb and noun as in the Lord's prayer, Luke 11.4). There is intense rivalry between the aristocracy and the people; Coriolanus, "the most illustrious man of his age" (6.94.2), as one of the former, keeps the price of corn high (7.20.4). Tribunes, representing the plebeians, charge Coriolanus, but he is defended by Minucius, who then advises Coriolanus to descend from his haughtiness (*uperephanon*) and to assume the humble and piteous demeanor (*schema tapeinon kai eleeinon*) of one who has erred (*emartekotos*) and is asking pardon (7.45.4). Manius Valerius also addresses Coriolanus, advising him to "change his way of life to a humble deportment (*schema tapeinon metalabein*, 7.54.5). He refuses, and the Romans vote for Coriolanus' perpetual banishment (7.64.6). The rich Roman general then

17. See Balch, "Political Friendship" and "Rich and Poor, Proud and Humble in Luke-Acts." These articles cite the "historian" Dionysius; today I would add comparative texts from the "biographer" Plutarch, *Coriolanus* (Loeb Classical Library). See also Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* (1608) and Bertolt Brecht, *Coriolan*.

describes himself as cast aside, forsaken, exiled, and humbled (8.1.5), as a resourceless, homeless, humbled outcast (*tapeinon*, 8.32.3). This suits the character of the God praised by Mary in the Magnificat, by Jesus in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, by Peter in his inaugural sermon, and by Paul in the Philippians hymn. Coriolanus utterly refused to humble himself in relation to the poor. In contrast, Christ Jesus humbled himself, took the form of a slave, and became obedient to the point of death on a cross; therefore, God also highly exalted him.

The story of God's action ritualized in meals

Finally, this is ritually embodied in meals, symbolically the most sensitive social events in Greco-Roman culture. A leader invites Jesus to a meal on the Sabbath, "and they were watching him closely" (14:1),[18] no longer a surprise. Jesus heals a man of dropsy, "a Cynic metaphor for consuming passion" (Braun 30-38), on the Sabbath, striking in Greco-Roman society, where luxurious display in triclinia generated honor and power. I do not have space to interpret this parable of the dinner (14:15-24), only to quote Luke's interpretation: "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (14:11)

Second, Jesus tells the parable of watchful slaves "whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down [literally: recline, the posture of masters] to eat, and he will come and serve (*diakonesei*) them" (Luke 12:37), another reversal, as in the Magnificat. Those who had been socially and legally shamed are honored.

Mark narrates the dispute about which disciple is the greatest when Jesus is still journeying to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32, 35-45). The redactor of Luke purposely moves this story into the narrative of the Last Supper immediately after the "words of institution" (Luke 22:15-22, 24-30). "For which is the greater, the one who sits [reclines] at table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who sits [reclines] at table? But I am among you as one who serves" (*diakonon*, Luke 22:27, NRSV). When instituting the Eucharist, Jesus teaches as a shamed slave.

Will the ELCA accept God's acceptance of *allophyles*/LGBT pastors?

Is Jesus not teaching us about the God whom we saw acting in the awesome events at the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, the God we worshiped, to whom we prayed every twenty minutes, whose Spirit we felt moving among us, when God and the church accepted those formerly legally and religiously shamed, reversing millennia of rejection, inviting those formerly excluded now to serve the Eucharist among us?[19] Will church members, congregations, deacons, pastors, and bishops accept these newly called and ordained ministers of word and sacrament?

18. On this parable of an upside down banquet, see the innumerable insights of Willi Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* SNTS Monograph 85 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995).

19. See *Homosexuality, Science, and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000; republished Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007). David L. Balch, "Rom 1:24-27, Science, and Homosexuality," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25/6 (December 1998), 433-40.

Luke as Counter-Narrative: The Gospel as Social Vision and Practice

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Approaching the Gospel of Luke as counter-narrative

Advent marks the beginning of a new year in the church's calendar. The seasons and rhythms of the church calendar are at odds with a world driven by markets and a multitude of political and personal interests. Throughout this year churches around the world following the Revised Common Lectionary will be hearing the Gospel of Luke. The story will be read in bits and pieces, but it was written as a coherent narrative that includes not only the Gospel of Luke but also Acts as the sequel which continues Luke's story of Jesus as it finds expression in the earliest assemblies of Christ. In this article I would like to explore the Gospel of Luke as a tightly woven *counter-narrative* that sets out an alternative vision of life that challenged the foundational values and structures of Greco-Roman society. In particular, I want to look at how the Gospel of Luke was designed to shape the identity and practices of assemblies of Christ in the last couple of decades of the first century.

To read Luke's story of Jesus as a counter-narrative is to commit to a certain perspective and set of assumptions that need to be identified at the outset. Whether we are aware of it or not, we always read biblical texts from a particular social location that influences how we see the world and indeed how we hear the texts. We bring our own interests and agendas to the text, and these are shaped by the social worlds in which we live and move and have our being. There are both differences and similarities between the social world in which Luke-Acts was written and heard and our own. The social and political environment of the New Testament as a whole was determined by Roman rule and Greco-Roman values and mores. The religious environment of the Gospel of Luke is Judaism.

One important distinction between ancient culture and contemporary culture is that in our cultural contexts there is, ostensibly at least, a separation of political economy and religion. But Luke writes for people who live in a world in which the elite of the Roman Empire controlled almost all of the resources as well as the social and political structures that determined peoples' lives. Moreover, the *Pax Romana* and the Greco-Roman way of life were legitimated by religious practices which included a variety of indigenous cults linked together under the banner of the imperial cult. Luke alone among the Gospels invokes this imperial system by noting that Jesus was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus and during the time of a census that was taken for the sake of collecting taxes (3:1-3). In these few verses Luke signals the correlation between the world of Roman rule and the

economic hardship caused by the burden of taxation.

Approximately ninety percent of people in the Roman Empire lived around subsistence level.[1] In other words, the majority of people were preoccupied with basic needs of food and shelter. It is precisely this experience of life under Roman rule that is alluded to in Mary's Song: "[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; [God] has filled the hungry with good things" (1:52-53). The Gospel of Luke is a counter-narrative inasmuch as the divine beneficence and healing mediated through Jesus are set in contrast to an experience of imperial society as one of scarcity and subjugation. Yet while imperial propaganda extolling the benefits of the *Pax Romana* and the benefaction of the emperor may serve as a back-story for Luke's Gospel, the two-volume narrative does not directly challenge the Roman Empire as an ideological system.[2] Rather, as prophet Jesus critiques the social system from a more practical perspective, and as teacher he articulates specific principles and practices that serve as the foundation for a way of life that is set in contrast to the Greco-Roman way of life.[3]

In the ancient world all texts were rhetorical, that is, they were designed to change the attitudes and actions of those who heard them. The Gospel of Luke functions rhetorically as a counter-narrative because in telling the story of Jesus it envisions a counter-cultural way of life. Luke recounts the events of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection as a way of communicating "God's purpose" for a world under Roman rule (cf. 7:30).[4] Consequently, this brings Jesus into conflict with those in the narrative who represent beliefs and practices that are at odds with God's purpose. More often than not Jesus' antagonists in the Gospel are Pharisees and lawyers, but it is their practices that he denounces:

> But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have *practiced,* without neglecting the others. Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the seat of honor in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces (11:42-43).

Here and throughout the Gospel behavior and practices that reflect the justice and love of God are contrasted with characters

1. See S. J. Friesen's poverty scale in "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the so-called New Consensus," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament,* vol. 26 (2004), 323-61 and in "Injustice of God's Will: Explanations of Poverty in Proto-Christian Texts" in R. Horsley, ed., *A People's History of Christianity: Christian Origin.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 240-60.

2. A typical example of imperial propaganda is the inscription from Priene which reads: "Since the Providence which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue [divine power] that she might benefit mankind, sending him as *savior*…that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar…surpassing all previous benefactors and since the birthday of the *god Augustus* was the beginning for the world of the *gospel* that by reason of him" (9 BCE).

3. On Luke's depiction of Jesus as prophet in the Gospel of Luke see J. Severino Croatto, "Jesus, Prophet Like Elijah, and Prophet-Teacher Like Moses," *Journal of Biblical Literature,* vol. 124/3 (2005), 451-65.

4. The "purpose of God" is an important phrase in Luke-Acts. In addition to Luke 7:30 it also appears in Acts 2:23; 4:28; 13:36; 20:27.

intent on securing honor, status, and wealth without regard for the well-being of others. Jesus reproves the Pharisees in this passage, not because he disagrees with them theologically, but rather because their behavior betrays a preoccupation with honor characteristic of Greco-Roman culture.

Throughout Luke's narrative, as prophet and teacher Jesus calls into question the dispositions and conduct of characters who personify Greco-Roman social values and structures. The Gospel of Luke is designed to shape the communal identity and practices of audiences by showing how Jesus and his followers exemplify God's love and purpose. As a counter-narrative it provokes hearers to be and act differently. As is characteristic of Judaism, the emphasis throughout the narrative is more on the formation of character and community through praxis than on theology per se.[5] In her book *Reading Across Borders*, Shari Stone-Mediatore contrasts narratives written from dominant perspectives that are endorsed by powerful institutions and hence come to be accepted as "common-sense" knowledge with stories of marginalized experience that tend to conflict with this "common-sense knowledge.[6] She underscores the relationship between narrative and political thinking and emphasizes how narratives invoke experience and social practices and thereby contribute to critical thinking and liberatory politics.[7] In reading the Gospel of Luke as a counter-narrative against the backdrop of imperial society, Jesus and his followers are viewed as representatives of such marginalized experience advocating for a subaltern politics, namely the "kingdom of God," and calling into question the "common-sense" knowledge and practices that form the foundation of Greco-Roman society.

Salvation as restoration

Luke tells the story of Jesus as a story of God fulfilling promises of salvation for Israel and the nations. The word "salvation" and its cognates are used more in the Gospel of Luke than in any of the other Gospels.[8] In this Gospel salvation is defined in terms of the restoration of Israel and deliverance from her enemies. This is especially evident in the canticles found in the birth narrative. In Mary's Song God is depicted as "savior" who "has helped [God's] servant Israel, in remembrance of [God's] mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever" (1:54-56). The covenants with Abraham and David are also cited in Zechariah's prophecy with reference to the affirmations that God has visited and "redeemed" God's people that they might be "saved" from their enemies (1:67-80). Simeon is portrayed as looking for the "consolation of Israel" (2:25). However, when he takes the child Jesus in his arms and blesses him he declares that he has seen God's salvation "which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (2:28-32). These canticles and the numerous other citations

5. Shaye Cohen emphasizes that the essence of Judaism is the way of life of the Jews. Practices, not theology, determined the boundary lines within the Jewish community. Not a single tractate of either the Mishnah or the Talmud is devoted to a "theological" topic. Shaye Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 61.

6. Shari Stone-Mediatore, *Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledge of Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 6.

7. Ibid., 4-5.

8. The noun "salvation" occurs in 1:69, 71, 77; 2:30; 3:6; 19:9. "Savior" occurs in 1:47; 2:11. The verb "to save" occurs in 6:9; 7:50; 8:12, 36, 48, 50; 9:24; 13:23; 17:19; 18:26, 42; 19:10; 23:35, 37, 39.

from and allusions to Israel's scriptures raise the audience's expectation that Luke's story of Jesus is a story of God rescuing Israel and indeed all the nations from their enemies. The political force of this promise of salvation is evident. But in the aftermath of the Jewish wars and the destruction of Jerusalem, which remains central in Luke-Acts, it begs the question of how this promise will be fulfilled and what salvation might look like during a time when Judeans still live under Roman rule.

According to Luke-Acts, God's purpose is to bring salvation to Israel and the nations and thereby fulfill the Abrahamic covenant. That this hope is not fulfilled in the narrative world of the Gospel of Luke is evident in Luke 24:21: "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." The theme of restoration is picked up again at the beginning of Acts where the disciples ask the risen Jesus: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He tells them:

> It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:6-8).

Robert Tannehill has argued that from the narrator's perspective this makes Luke-Acts a tragic story because the narrative does not point to any concrete signs of change in the response of the Jews.[9] However, in considering the impact of Luke's narrative on audiences, it is not only a question of how expectations raised in Luke's story of Jesus are either realized or thwarted *within* the narrative world, but of how the narrative was designed to shape the convictions and actions and engender agency on the part of those who heard it. An important aspect of Luke's rhetorical strategy was to transform auditors' *expectations* with regard to what "salvation" and the restoration of Israel might look like on the ground (see 10:9, 23-24; 17:20). Moreover, the promise of empowerment in Acts 1:8 and the emphasis on putting into practice what Jesus teaches throughout the Gospel suggests that this is the means through which God will fulfill the promise of salvation. Since Luke presents the kingdom of God as in some sense a present reality, an important rhetorical impact of Luke's narrative was to motivate auditors to embody "salvation" in real-life cultural contexts.[10]

Repentance and renewal in Luke

Only Luke's account of John the Baptist includes the phrase from Isaiah 40 "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (3:6). This is followed immediately by John's exhortation to "bear fruits worthy of repentance…every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (3:8-9). To which the crowds reply with the question, "What then should we *do*?" John then recommends a number of specific *practices* for followers who have a surplus of goods, for tax collectors and soldiers. Moreover, elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke Jesus places similar emphasis on the importance of hearing his words and doing them:

> Why do you call me "Lord, Lord," and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes

9. Robert Tannehill, "The Story of Israel within the Lukan Narrative" in David Moessner, ed., *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 325-339.

10. For Luke's emphasis on the kingdom of God as present reality see 10:9; 11:20; 17:21.

> to me, *hears my words, and acts on them*. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But *the one who hears and does not act* is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house. (6:46-49 cf. 8:19-21; 11:27-28)

In Luke-Acts the offer of salvation requires a human response of "repentance." Within the *inclusio* signaled by the phrase "the salvation of God" (Luke 3:6; Acts 28:28) resides another *inclusio* signified by the theme "fruits/deeds worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8; Acts 26:20). Specific social, moral, ethical, financial, and religious inequalities are challenged in Luke-Acts, and repentance is presented as the means of correcting them.[11] Repentance is not just a theological principle, but rather denotes a change in behavior. Luke 1:16-17 signals at the outset the importance of conversion to a new pattern of living: "He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Acts takes up this theme and reinforces it by designating the movement "the Way," as in a *way of life*. In addition to reading Luke at the level of story, it is also important to pay attention to how the narrative works to alter day-to-day patterns of thinking, feeling, believing, and behaving. Salvation and the restoration of Israel and the nations are presented in the Gospel of Luke as an ongoing process of social transformation. The narrator assumes on the part of hearers a covenantal perspective in which God works through communities of Jesus' followers who were appropriating his teachings and example in their life together.[12]

Salvation as release

A key passage in the Gospel of Luke is the episode in which Jesus returns to his hometown synagogue after having been tested in the wilderness and reads from Isaiah 61:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> because [the Lord] has anointed me
> to bring good news to the poor.
> [The Lord] has sent me to proclaim
> *release to the captives*
> and recovery of sight to the blind,
> *to let the oppressed go free*,
> to proclaim the year of the Lord's
> favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

This is Jesus' inaugural sermon in which in the words of Isaiah he describes his ministry as one of liberating people from captivity. The mention of the "poor" picks up the theme of Mary's Song. The "year

11. See G. Nave, *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002).

12. This is plausible assumption if the Jewish character of Luke's narrative is acknowledged and appreciated. I take the minority view that Luke was written by a Jew when the Jesus movement was still a messianic sect within the ambit of Judaism. As a "Jewish Gospel" it makes sense that we read Luke not only as narrative, but also as *halakah*, that is, as depicting an alternative vision of life and practice. Nickelsburg remarks that "far from attesting a dichotomy between faith and action or an external obedience to commandments, stories in Jewish texts indicate an inextricable link between actions—including performances of divine ordinances—and trust in God that generates and enables such actions." George Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 38-39.

of the Lord" refers to the "year of jubilee" and restoration that served to relieve the plight of the poor (Lev 25).[13] As a whole the passage signals to the audience that in his ministry Jesus will address issues of economic distress. This is an emphasis throughout Luke's narrative and the strategic location of the Nazareth speech suggests that the hope of salvation should be understood, in part anyway, as deliverance from economic oppression (1:52; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22).

The Greek term for "release" in Luke 4:18-19 in both its verbal and noun forms is used repeatedly along with other related words in the Gospel of Luke to call attention to the action of releasing or freeing people from something. In fact, Jesus' ministry in Luke could be succinctly characterized as a ministry of release. But since Jesus is cast in the role of prophet and teacher in Luke, his ministry is depicted not simply as a series of episodic moments of "release" strung together. Rather, as prophet Jesus addresses the underlying causes of economic oppression, and as teacher he proposes alternative practices that, if adopted, would enact the economy of the kingdom of God.

In hearing or reading Luke's story as a whole, the hope of salvation as restoration in the first chapters is interpreted by Isaiah's image of the "release of captives" in Luke 4, and Jesus' ministry of release is further elucidated by his teaching in Luke 6. There he gives a sermon or speech that begins: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled" (6:20-21). In 6:30 he recommends a specific practice to deal with the problem of poverty in Greco-Roman society: "Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again." Then in 6:32-36 Jesus elaborates on and provides theological grounding for the exhortation not to request repayment.

> If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit (*charis*) is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:32-36)

In addition to offering a practical strategy for assisting the poor, Jesus here also disrupts the patronage model of reciprocity and power that governed interpersonal relationships in Greco-Roman society.

In Luke 6:32-34 the word that is translated "credit" in the NRSV is *charis*. In the New Testament *charis* is usually translated as "grace," but it was also widely used to denote a gift or benefit conferred by a patron as well as the client's response of gratitude.[14] In telling followers to give and do good without expecting anything in return Jesus both invokes and subverts the foundational pattern of reciprocity in Greco-Roman society that kept people beholden and submissive. Patron-client relations were characterized by inequality and reciprocity, but, more than that, patronage was a totalizing cultural system

13. See Sharon Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

14. F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1079-1080.

that encompassed every dimension of life. In the Roman Empire patronage was a dominant and generalized form of institutionalized resource allocation.[15] As Halvor Moxnes has noted, the central concern of first-century Greco-Roman economy was to have power to control the economic system and to expropriate surplus.[16] The patronage system was the basis of an economy in which a handful of elites controlled all the resources and others were depended on their "beneficence." Moreover, patronage ties fostered a sense of loyalty, obligation, and indebtedness that undermined social forms of solidarity and equality.[17]

If Jesus' teaching in Luke 6 is seen as part of the narrative arc that began with the poetic description of salvation and restoration set out in the canticles, then it serves as the foundation for an alternative social vision that is predicated on the Divine generosity that is mediated and modeled by Jesus and other characters in the Gospel. First of all, the early references to the covenants with Abraham and David indicate that it is a communal vision. In telling followers to give without expecting anything in return, Jesus is doing more than encouraging individual followers to be charitable. Just as the canticles in the birth narrative announce that the sovereign creator is about to effect salvation and restoration on behalf of the world, so Jesus is here succinctly proposing a strategy for how this salvation and restoration will be enacted by the covenant community living out a kingdom economy predicated on Divine generosity. The promise of "salvation" and restoration through "release" as Jesus acclaims in his Nazareth sermon from Isaiah will be realized as those who hear Jesus' words and do them (6:46) release one another from indebtedness and obligation and embody the beneficence and mercy of the sovereign creator in their dealings with one another (6:35). In other words, by refusing to participate in the reciprocity ethic, the covenant community is "released" from a patronage system that is at the hub of their oppression in order to practice a way of life in which everyone's needs are met.

Exemplifying divine beneficence

Many of the episodes in the Gospel of Luke exemplify Jesus' teaching in 6:27-36 by demonstrating how it is possible to operate outside the patronage system. Throughout the Gospel of Luke the subversive wisdom Jesus teaches in this passage is elaborated on and embodied by a variety of characters in the narrative. If we read Luke as rhetoric, then we must ask how the rhetorical strategy of the narrative served to shape the identity and practices of audiences. It functions as a counter-narrative that both describes and challenges the way the Greco-Roman world works, especially as a patronage system.[18] As such it serves as a possible provocation to be and act differently in the world. In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter emphasizes the importance of being aware of the "grid of convention upon which and against which

15. See Johnson and Dandeker, "Patronage: Relation and System" in A. Wallace-Hadrill, ed., *Patronage in Ancient Society* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

16. Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 27.

17. Johnson and Dandeker, "Patronage," 223-224.

18. For another treatment of Luke's engagement with patronage which argues that Luke-Acts holds out a vision of "radical patronage" see Eric Heen, "Radical Patronage in Luke-Acts," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, vol. 33 (2006), 445-458.

a narrative operates."[19] In Luke-Acts the patronage system and the reciprocity ethic upon which it is founded is the tacit and predominant cultural frame of reference against which the narrative operates. In other words, many if not most of the main Lucan themes such as hospitality, economics, and even prayer should be interpreted as challenging the reciprocity ethic and demonstrating various ways people embody Divine beneficence. Sometimes Luke will actually describe the way the world works in terms of obligation and being beholden, and in other instances it is simply implied. But reading Luke in the light of the patronage system illuminates a rhetorical strategy designed to show in very practical ways how people are "released" from the Greco-Roman cultural system to enact the economy of the kingdom of God.

A brief summary of how some of the scenes serve as example stories demonstrating alternative patterns of relating not constrained by the reciprocity ethic illustrates the counter-cultural impact of Luke's narrative. In the opening chapters of the Gospel, Caesar Augustus and Quirinius are portrayed as patrons, and the mention of the census reminds the audience that Judeans were beholden to the imperial patronage system (2:1-7). This corresponds in the narrative to an analogous depiction of the devil as broker of the kingdoms of the world (4:24-30). It is clear that the world does not operate according to God's purposes and therefore is in need of change. However, the promised change will be effected as people "repent" and live according to the values and practices of the kingdom of God (3:1-14).

Luke's account of Jesus being tested by the devil intimates that participation in the kingdom of God involves resisting the devil, who ironically lays claim to "all the kingdoms of the world," and trusting the sovereign Creator who alone is worthy of honor and worship (4:1-13). This is followed by two call stories in Luke 5 in which Simon Peter, James and John, and Levi the tax collector "leave everything" to follow Jesus. What exactly are these characters leaving? The Galilean fishing economy was an "embedded economy" characteristic of aristocratic empires in which most of the surplus went to brokers and ruling elite. These first disciples don't actually own anything, so what they were "leaving" was a livelihood in which most of the fruit of their labor went to patrons who owned the boats and equipment.[20] John the Baptist's exhortation to tax collectors to "collect no more than the amount prescribed for you" (3:13) suggests that, while Levi may not have relinquished his job, there is an expectation that he no longer exploit tax payers. These call stories demonstrate that Jesus is inviting hearers into a restoration project that entails reorientation away from "common-sense knowledge" upon which Greco-Roman society is founded and towards God's purposes for the new age based on alternative practices.

Three times in Luke 4-7 Jesus acclaims "the poor have good news brought to them" (4:18; 6:20; 7:22). What is this good news brought to the poor if not release from an economic system that keeps them impoverished and beholden and the promise of new and better practices of solidarity and sharing? Jesus is not simply encouraging charitable giving that perpetuates dependency, but rather laying down principles for living as the covenant community. Just as Jesus is an

19. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 47.

20. See K. C. Hanson, "The Galilean Fishing Economy and the Jesus Tradition," Biblical Theology Bulletin, vol. 27 (1997), 99-111.

exemplar of divine beneficence that gives freely without expecting anything in return, Luke's narrative includes several characters who also bear witness to the economy of God's kingdom. The woman who creates a scene by kissing and anointing Jesus' feet at the house of Simon the Pharisee shows herself to be a "daughter of the Most High" (6:35) by her extravagant generosity toward Jesus (7:36-50). The Samaritan in Jesus' parable is an unlikely example of a person who loves his enemy and gives without expecting anything in return (10:25-36). He too behaves as a child of the Most High. Luke brings the travel narrative to a climax with the story of Zacchaeus, another tax collector who departs from accepted conventions and demonstrates God's generosity and justice in giving half of his goods to the poor (19:1-10).

In contrast to these characters and others who represent the possibility of enacting the economy of the kingdom God, there are also a variety of characters who serve as negative examples. The Pharisees in Luke are caricatured as teachers of Torah who live according to Greco-Roman values and conventions inasmuch as they are full of greed and preoccupied with their own honor (11:37-44; 16:14-15). The rich fool who hoards his possessions instead of being rich toward God (12:13-21), the rich man who ignores Lazarus (16:19-31) and the rich ruler who is unable to share his wealth with the poor are examples of people who are unable to give without expecting anything in return. Their dispositions and conduct are set in contrast to Jesus and his followers. They are two antithetical sets of characters representing two very different ways of living.

Concluding reflection

Luke's story of Jesus offers an alternative vision of life and practice that promises God's deliverance from the dehumanizing effects of imperial society for the covenant community that hears Jesus' words and does them. The two important Lukan themes of hospitality and economic redistribution should be understood in the light of "release" from the conventions of the patronage system with its competition for honor to embody divine generosity without strings attached. This is what *salvation* looks like on the ground in Luke. The hope of the restoration of Israel now includes all the nations and so has been transmuted into a hope for the restoration of society. Transformation occurs as people begin to live according to God's purposes by appropriating Jesus' teaching in their life together.

To read the Gospel of Luke as counter-narrative is to recognize and appreciate the extent to which it was engaging the cultural narratives, values, and practices of Greco-Roman society. To read Luke's story of Jesus as counter-narrative in our own context would be to allow it to raise questions about the secular myths of "salvation" and cultural systems to which we are beholden that deform and dehumanize us. Life can be construed as a series of exchanges that are governed by "common-sense" cultural values and conventions that govern the way we live until they are called into question. In our own time it is the market economy that determines value and shapes the way we live.

The sacred order which structures individual action in North American, Western, and increasingly world culture is, according to John Boli, primarily represented in the economic realm.[21] The

21. John Boli, "The Economic Absorption of the Sacred," in Robert Wuthnow,

meaning of life is full participation in the exchange economy, as both producer of value and consumer of goods. Charles Lindblom, an economics professor, maintains that the market system is a society-wide coordination of human activities not by central command but by mutual interactions in the form of transactions. He goes on to observe, "that market participants see themselves as making free and voluntary choices does not deny that they are controlled by purchase and sales."[22] We may not be as free as we have thought. But the Gospel of Luke invites us to imagine what Jesus' ministry of "release" might look like in our own world. More than that, it exhorts those of us committed to hearing what Jesus teaches and doing it to enact a world of divine abundance and generosity where there is enough for everyone because women and men who know themselves to be "children of the Most High" give without expecting anything in return.

ed., *Rethinking Materialism: Perspectives on the Spiritual Dimension of Economic Behavior* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 93-115.

22. Charles Lindblom, *The Market System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 8.

Turning the World Upside Down—Preaching Luke's Story

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Luke's unique interpretation of Jesus offers marvelous opportunities for proclamation in the twenty-first century. He writes, as he says in Luke 1:4, that the reader may know the certainty of the matters in which he has been instructed. Just what these matters are makes an interesting discussion and offers suggestions for emphases in teaching and preaching.

1. A two-volume work

In spite of the lectionary limiting itself to the Gospel, interpretation of Luke must take into account that separating Acts from Luke is contrary to Luke's own intention. Luke 1:1-4 introduces both Luke and Acts, as Acts 1:1 indicates. In discerning Luke's outline and/or purpose[s], one must use both Luke and Acts. Luke is interested in locating his account of Jesus and the origins of the early church within the context of secular history. He alone in the New Testament names Roman emperors (Augustus, Tiberius and Claudius) and other secular rulers (Luke 2:1, 3:1-2; Acts 18:2). In his trail Jesus appears before two Roman officials, while Paul appears before a sequence of Roman provincial proconsuls or prefects, all of whom pronounce him innocent of any political threat to Rome.

2. An introduction typical of hellenistic historiography

Luke 1:1-4 describes what Luke-Acts is about. Note his historical methods: he has checked out earlier accounts—including eyewitness accounts; has put his material into a coherent order; has taken care to be precise. This introduction follows the pattern of Greco-Roman historical writers, describing sources, research methods, relation to earlier narratives, purpose in writing, and dedicating the work to a named individual, in Luke's case the most excellent Theophilos.[1]

Luke wrote with an evangelical purpose in mind, not *mihi et musis, (*not "for myself and the Muses"). That is, while his two-volume work shows some evidence of literary influence, he did not write as Thucydides did to produce a κτῆμα ἐς ἀεί ("a possession forever") or as old Horace did, to achieve literary name or fame. Luke was not concerned to achieve literary immortality. Horace was; he wrote in Ode 3:30

> Exegi monumentum aere perennius
>
> Non omnis moriar multaque pars mei uitabit Libitinam;….
>
> ["I have erected a monument more enduring than bronze…I shall not die completely. Rather a great part of me will evade the goddess of death."]

1. Henry J. Cadbury, "Literary Formulae," in *The Making of Luke-Acts* (London: S.P.C.J., 1958), pp. 194-204; and Loveday C. A. Alexander, "The Preface to Acts and the Historians," in *History, Literature and Society in the Book of Acts,* ed. Ben Witherington, III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 73-103.

Literary ability Luke had.[2] And, like other ancient historians, he was concerned with ψυχαγωγία, with leading his reader to a goal. Luke's goal is clear: he wrote to most excellent Theophilos in order to assure him of τὴν ἀσφάλειαν, the certainty, the trustworthiness of the accounts he had heard. But this is first-century history, not modern, critical history that seeks to discover facts. Luke seeks to persuade his hearer to trust the Christian tradition. One might compare Luke1:1-4 to Josephus, *In Apionem* 1.1-5; *BJ* 1.1-12 to see how typical this introduction is. And Luke's goal is one all proclaimers share—or should share, if we do not.

3. Stress on mission

Luke-Acts (hereafter simply Luke) stresses the mission to the Roman world. This is what ties the Gospel and Acts together. Luke 24:46-49 stresses the mission to "all the gentile nations," while Acts 1:8 spells out the progress that will be made, "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and as far as the end of the earth." As Psalms of Solomon 8:15 makes clear, Rome is the end of the earth for Palestinian Jews: ἤγαγεν τὸν ἀπ᾽ ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς, τὸν παίοντα κραταιῶς (that is, Pompeus Magnus); ἔκρινεν τὸν πόλεμον ἐπὶ Ιερουσαλημ καὶ τὴν γῆν αὐτῆς. This may account for Luke having two stories about sending out missionaries in Luke 9:1-6,10 (sending out of the twelve) and 10:1-12, 17-20 (sending out of the 70 or 72). Luke adds an interpretation to the second passage, but not to the first.

In Acts Luke's heroes are Peter and Paul, the early proclaimers of the resurrected Christ. While he mentions Philip and Stephen in Acts 6–8, Peter and Paul dominate his narrative as the key witnesses to Christ. Peter was dragged into mission to non-Jews in Acts 10; Paul was in mission to them from the beginning—and Peter was led to affirm that in Acts 15. Both were taken out of their normal environment and traveled to places that challenged their culture and mores. But they went for their Lord.

Acts differs from the Gospel geographically. Luke disregards Alexandria and the Christianity that moved east from Palestine. We hear little or nothing of Byzantion. The Gospel shows Jesus in village contexts until he goes to Jerusalem, which is the place of Jesus' resurrection appearances in the Gospel and the beginning of the Christian mission in Acts. Luke is interested in the urban centers of the Roman world in Acts: Philippi (ἥτις ἐστὶν πρώτης μερίδος τῆς Μακεδονίας πόλις, κολωνία, Acts 16:12), Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Miletus, Caesarea Maritima, and Rome. Rome is the ultimate goal, the end of the earth. There Paul preaches "the royal rule of God and about the Lord Jesus Christ with entire freedom of speech, unhindered [by the authorities]" [Acts 28:31]. The good news about Jesus has reached its goal. Thus there is no need to posit an uncompleted work or a missing third volume. Luke is not writing a Pauline biography. Thus he does not describe Paul's plans to go to Spain (Rom 15:23-24) or Paul's death. It is the planting of Christian communities (note the use of the term "Christians" in Acts 11:26; elsewhere only in 1 Pet 4:16) that is his focus. Any use of Luke-Acts must stress Luke's missionary interest.

4. Modes of theological discourse

Luke's style of narrative is very interesting. While Luke 1:1-4 is one periodic

2. Henry J. Cadbury, "Four Features of Lukan Style," in *Studies in Luke-Acts,* ed. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Nashville, New York: Abingdon Press, 1966), 87-110.

sentence in Greek, written in almost Atticizing style, at Luke 1:5 he shifts into a more Septuagintal style, closer to the Old Testament. The Psalm-like passages in the infancy narratives, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55, close to the Song of Hannah, 1 Sam 2:1-10), the Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79), and Nunc Dimmitis (Luke 2:29-32) are written in typical semitic parallelism. When Luke gets into Acts, however, his writing is much more Hellenistic in flavor. Paul's speeches at Lystra (Acts 14:14-17) and Athens (Acts 17:22-31) use Hellenistic motifs. Paul cites Aratus, *Phainomena* 5 (a Stoic text) in the Areiopagos speech. Luke's account of Paul in Philippi (Acts 16:11-40) is filled with items that recall Greek motifs, e.g., the reference to a πνεῦμα πύθωνα ("a pythonic spirit," Acts 16:16) recalls the founding myth of Apollo at Delphi, while the delivery of Paul and his companions from jail (Acts 16:27) inevitably reminds one of the deliverance of Dionysos from prison in Euripides' *Bacchae.*

Luke's use of speeches in Luke-Acts reminds one of the role of speeches in Thucydides.[3] Luke's Jesus opens up his ministry with a very brief synagogue homily in Luke 4:16-21. The story (Luke 4:16-30) anticipates many of Luke's motifs in Luke-Acts: fulfillment of the Old Testament (see Luke 24, where every narrative uses fulfillment of prophecy) and Peter's sermons in Acts 2 and 10. It uses the citation of Isa 61:1ff. to stress the poor. The subsequent events stress Gentiles and anticipate the opposition and death of Jesus.[4]

Luke often uses parallel stories in effective ways. Luke 1 and 2 balances the annunciations of the births of John and Jesus and their births to stress the superiority of Jesus to John. Indeed, when Mary visits Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45), Elizabeth interprets the movement of John in her womb as obeisance to the unborn Jesus, his superior. John expressly denies that he is a messianic figure in Luke 3:15-17. Luke has John the Baptist in prison before Jesus baptizes himself (?) in Luke 3:18-19. Thus John never is in the same place as Jesus in Luke's Gospel. Acts 19:1-7 may give us a clue to this unique treatment on John by Luke since a John the Baptist cult does not recognize Jesus, perhaps similar to the Mandeans. Luke also parallels Gospel material with material in Acts. Mark Powell provides an extensive, very helpful list of such parallels.[5]

5. Note unique blocks of material

Luke's outline is distinctive. He makes four major modifications to Mark's outline. He prefaces Mark's account with Luke 1–2, the infancy stories told from the viewpoint of Mary, a reflection of his interest in women. He omits all the material from Mark 6:45 to Mark 8:26. This makes the feeding of the five thousand come immediately before the confession of Peter (Luke 9:12-22). The feeding story is the only miracle told in all four Gospels, in many respects the clearest claim to messiah-ship Jesus ever performed. 2 Maccabees 2:1-8 says that when Jeremiah went to Egypt, he took the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant (with the rod of Aaron, the sacred fire, the pot of manna, and the tables of the law), and the altar and hid them in a cave, to be revealed only when the glory of the Lord is revealed. There was a belief that one sign of the end

3. On Thucydides see W. J. McCoy, "In the Shadow of Thucydides," in *History, Literature and Society in the Book of Acts,* ed. Ben Witherington III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3-32.

4. Eduard Schweizer, "Concerning the Speeches in Acts," in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, 208-216.

5. Mark Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), Figure 17, 88.

time would be the miraculous feeding of Israel from the pot of manna.

Luke inserts two blocks of material into Mark's outline. The Lesser Insertion is Luke 6:20–8:3, the Sermon on the Plain, two miracles (the healing of the centurion's servant and the raising of the young man at Nain) and the forgiving of the woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Luke follows this with the summary statement of the women who follow Jesus and minister to his needs, both stories of women acting in ways that offend the surrounding culture. The Great Insertion (Luke 9:51–18:14) is the great travel narrative from Galilee to Jerusalem. What Mark covers in one chapter (Mark 10), Luke expands to 10 chapters. Before that trip Luke says that Jesus, Moses and Elijah appear in glory and talk about the exodus Jesus is about to fill up in Jerusalem (οἳ ὀφθέντες ἐν δόξῃ ἔλεγον τὴν ἔξοδον αὐτοῦ, ἣν ἤμελλεν πληροῦν ἐν Ἰερουσαλήμ, Luke 9:51). This travel narrative is the occasion for much of Jesus' disciple teaching in the Gospel, including many of the parables unique to Luke.[6] The travel narrative is the wandering in the wilderness in which divine instruction is given.[7]

6. Stresses in Luke's Gospel

There are other significant items that Luke stresses in his Gospel. I list many of them without providing detailed support.[8] There is great interest in the marginalized in first-century society: the poor, Samaritans, and women. Luke clearly stresses that the Gentiles are fully included in God's plan of salvation, as Acts stresses. There is a defense of Peter in the Gospel; he has a special call in Luke 5:1-10. In the upper room, Luke 22:31-34, Jesus orders Peter to strengthen his fellow disciples when he repents, preparing the reader for Peter's role in Acts—and probably defending him against later attacks because of his denial.

Jerusalem is a significant city for Luke. In Matthew Jesus enters Jerusalem as her judge. Matthew omits the phrase "Just and bringing salvation is he" (δίκαιος καὶ σώζων) from his citation of Zechariah 9:9 in Matthew 21:5. Both Mark and Matthew have no resurrection appearances in Jerusalem, but stress Galilee in the Easter narratives. But Luke has a sequence of Resurrection appearances in Luke 24, and Jerusalem is a key city for the nascent church in Acts. Geography serves theology in Luke-Acts.

Luke stresses a number of theological motifs. For example, use your concordance to check out the significance of prayer in Luke, of meals in both the Gospel and Acts, of the role of the Spirit (πνεῦμα) in Luke-Acts, of the use of Elijah narratives, and of the significance of baptism in this two-volume work.

7. The Lukan crucifixion account

Luke's crucifixion story illustrates well how such motifs show up in a significant narrative.[9] Luke 23:26 has Simon of Cyrene in North Africa, a Greek colony founded in the sixth century B.C.E., carry Jesus' cross. Like the centurion in 22:47-48 he is from a gentile city. A crowd of women follow Jesus to the place of crucifixion, mourning his death. Jesus turns and warns them of the coming eschatological crisis,

6. See the list of unique material in this section in Powell, 87.

7. For a brief comment on Luke's sources see Frederick Danker, *Jesus and the New Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 16-17.

8. See Charles Puskas and David Crump, *An Introduction to the Gospels and Acts* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 115-23; 128-46; Powell, 100-110.

9. A useful treatment is Donald Senior, C. P., *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1989).

citing Hosea 10:8, a reflection of Jesus' concern for women (Luke 22:27-32). In similar fashion, the crowd does not mock him, but simply stand watching (Luke 22:38); when he dies, this group returns to Jerusalem in repentance (τύπτοντες τὰ στήθη ὑπέστρεφον, Luke 23:48). They are like the people Jesus hung around with earlier in the Gospel.

Jesus speaks three times from the cross in Luke, all unique to this Gospel. "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 22:34), interceding on behalf of the crucifixion detail. To the one thief who repents he says, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). And his final word is drawn from Ps 31:5: "Father, I hand over my life into your hands" (Luke 23:46). In Luke Jesus is not deserted by God, as Mark and Matthew suggest. He calls God "Father" as he did in the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:2). He continues his ministry of reaching out to the marginalized in these words.

When Jesus dies, the centurion says "This person really was just (δίκαιος, Luke 23:47). This clearly has implications for the relation of Christians to the Roman government.[10] In Luke 23:1-2 the accusers bring a political charge against Jesus before Pilate. One recalls that Pilate three times pronounces Jesus innocent (Luke 23:4, 14, and emphatically in 22), as does Herod (Luke 23:15). As Fred Danker says, Pilate's decision to crucify Jesus is "history's most lamentable travesty of justice."[11] One could do a similar study of the unique elements in the resurrection narrative in Luke 24.

8. Conclusion

Thebes in Boeotia is about 50 miles northeast of Athens, situated in a fertile plain. It played an important role in Greek mythology. The *Seven Against Thebes* told how Polynikes and Eteocles, twin brothers, fought at Thebes, while in the *Antigone*, which follows the *Seven* in the myth, Antigone scatters dust on Polynikes' corpse as an act of ritual burial, forbidden by King Kreon. The *Antigone* raises the issue of personal freedom over against the totalitarian state. It was not surprising that Rudolf Bultmann wrote an article on that drama in the 1930s as a way of expressing dissent from Adolf Hitler's mode of rule. And they are just two of the ancient dramas that take place in or around Thebes.

The first choral ode in *Antigone* begins πόλλα τὰ δεῖνα, κοὐδὲν δεινοτερὸ ἀνθρώπων πέλει. "Many things are marvelous; but nothing is more marvelous [or should it be translated 'dreadful'?] than human beings." That is quite understandable in the *Antigone.* But it is hardly what the evangelist Luke would maintain, though he is also tied to Thebes. Luke regards not humans, but the son of humanity as more marvelous. Greek Orthodox Christians regard ancient Thebes as the burial place of Luke; they will show you the site in Thebes. He is supposed to have died there on October 18 at the age of 84, never having married. Tradition identifies him as a doctor, which, with few exceptions was not the honored profession it is today. Many doctors were slaves. Does that become the basis for Luke's interest in the marginalized?

There are great preaching values in Luke-Acts, if one pays attention to the unique features of Luke's two-volume work. The books in the select bibliography that follows can be of great help in finding those preaching points.

10. See Daryl Schmidt, "Luke's 'Innocent' Jesus," in *Political Issues in Luke-Acts,* ed. Richard J. Cassidy and Philip J. Scharper (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 111-21.

11. Frederick Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on Luke's Gospel*, 369.

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At What Elevation Is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount?[1]

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Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has always held great fascination for me, and it continues to fascinate me, as it has countless Christians and non-Christians down through the ages. Much of what I have to say here will not be new, but I do want to share some of my own insights into this great piece of religious discourse, hoping that they will be both helpful and timely in a day when teachings embodied in this Sermon greatly need to be heard.

Our world today has trouble enough, and the Christian church is also in crisis. The daily newspapers and news on the television remind us without letup how impure the world and the church have become. What then should we do? Pray? Of course, but we need to do more than pray. Christians in other times like our own have returned to examine the foundations of our faith to see what they can teach us, and I can think of no more foundational teaching in Christianity than Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Matthew features it prominently at the beginning of his Gospel, where it appears to be nothing less than a "new covenant" presented to the nascent church.

The world many times has been transformed by this Sermon. It profoundly influenced Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. in their efforts to achieve freedom and social justice. For them, Jesus' Sermon embodied not simply lofty ideals but teachings capable of being put into practice and capable of bringing about substantive change. Gandhi was particularly impressed with the Sermon on the Mount, saying, "it went straight to my heart." Quoting Matthew 5:39-40 about not returning a smite on the cheek and giving up one's cloak along with his tunic, he said that renunciation was the highest form of religion, for which reason Jesus' Sermon appealed to him greatly.[2] He went on to say: "The message of Jesus, as I understand it, is contained in the *Sermon on the Mount…* It is that *Sermon* which has endeared Jesus to me." But, he added: "The message, to my mind, has suffered distortion in the West…Much of what passes as Christianity is a negation of the *Sermon on the Mount*."[3] When Germany in the last century began experiencing deep

1. This essay was initially presented as a lecture to the Faculty Convocation at Madras Christian College, Chennai, India, in July, 2005.

2. M. K. Gandhi, *Gandhi's Autobiography*, tr. by Mahadev Desai (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1960), 92; idem., *What Jesus Means to Me* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1959), 4.

3. Pinchas Lapide, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 3; cf. Gandhi, *What Jesus Means to Me*, 11.

crisis after Hitler came to power, one of its Lutheran pastors and theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote a book titled *The Cost of Discipleship*, which was based on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.[4] It was published in 1937, and had a great impact in its day as well as in the years subsequent to World War II.

Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430), not long after his conversion to Christianity, wrote a commentary on the Sermon, which was the first of its kind.[5] He was also first to call this portion of Scripture *de sermone Domini in monte* ("The Lord's Sermon on the Mount"). Martin Luther did not write a commentary on the Sermon, or on Matthew, but his *Weekly Sermons on Matthew 5–7*, which were preached at Wittenberg between October 1530 and April 1532, contain a treasure of insights into the Sermon, such as we have come to expect from this extraordinary man.[6]

Beginning with Luther comes the idea that this Sermon preaches a way of life that is unattainable. Luther saw in the Sermon an impossible ethic designed to awaken us to our inadequacy and sinfulness, which would then drive us to seek God's mercy and help (Romans 5–7).[7] Luther is also recorded as saying that the Sermon on the Mount does not belong in city hall, for "one cannot govern" with it.[8]

Leo Tolstoy took the Sermon on the Mount very seriously, believing that these commands of Jesus had to be taken as obligatory in the most literal sense.[9] However, he could not live by them and ended his life tragically, abandoning his family to die at a railway station.[10] Fredrick Nietzsche was unimpressed with the Sermon, saying it taught a "slave morality." In its requirements of love and meekness he found a mood dangerous to the heroic temper.[11]

For many others, both believers and nonbelievers, the Sermon's teaching is too elevated. Robert Frost in his poem, "A Masque of Mercy," (1947)[12] includes a dialogue taking place in a bookstore late at night after the doors have been closed. Present only are the bookkeeper, who is the owner of the store, his wife, and a fellow named Paul. The dialogue goes as follows:

Keeper: Paul's constant theme. The Sermon on the Mount
Is just a frame-up to insure the failure
Of all of us, so all of us will be

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1963).

5. H. D. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 11.

6. Ibid., 15-16.

7. J. Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1961). 6-9; D. J. Harrington, "The Sermon on the Mount: What Is It?" *The Bible Today*, vol. 36 (1998), 284.

8. Lapide, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 4.

9. One sees this clearly in his novel *Resurrection*, tr. by Rosemary Edmonds (London: Penguin Books, 1966), where his lead character, Nekhlyudov, begins reading the Sermon on the Mount and for the first time finds in it "not beautiful abstract thoughts, presenting for the most part exaggerated and impossible demands, but simple, clear, practical commandments, which if obeyed (and this was quite feasible) would establish a completely new order of human society," 565-566; cf. Amos Wilder, *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1939), ix.

10. Harvey K. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1960), 107.

11. Wilder, "Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus," ix.

12. Robert Frost, *Selected Poems* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973), 268-269.

Thrown prostrate at the Mercy Seat for Mercy.

Wife: Yes, Paul, you do say things like that sometimes

Paul: You all have read the Sermon on the Mount,
I ask you all to read it once again
(They put their hands together like a book
And hold it up nearsightedly to read.)

Keeper & Wife: We're reading it

Paul: Well, now, you've got it read
What do you make of it?

Wife: The same old nothing

Keeper: A beautiful impossibility

Paul: Keeper, I'm glad you think it beautiful

Keeper: An irresistible impossibility
A lofty beauty no one can live up to
Yet no one turns from trying to live up to

Paul: Yes, spoken so we can't live up to it
Yet so we'll have to weep because we can't
Mercy is only to the undeserving
But such we all are made in the sight of God.

Gerhard Kittel, in similar fashion, echoes the sentiments of Luther saying:

> The meaning of the Sermon on the Mount is: Demolish!
>
> It can only tear down. In the long run it has only one purpose: to expose and exhibit the great poverty in empiric human beings.

He continues:

> This is what you ought to do, you wretched weakling, but you can't succeed, as you well know. That is why you need God's gracious love for everything you undertake.[13]

Karl Barth believed that constructing a picture of the Christian life from directives contained in the Sermon on the Mount has always proved impossible. He says: "It would be sheer folly to interpret the imperatives of the Sermon on the Mount as if we should bestir ourselves to actualize these pictures."[14] Reinhold Niebuhr agreed, saying: "The ethical demands made by Jesus are incapable of fulfillment."[15] And Krister Stendahl, Lutheran churchman and scholar, viewed the Sermon if not as utopian at least as an unattainable ideal, putting him squarely in the tradition of Luther.

Some scholars have been content to say that Jesus' teachings are "exceptional." The great New Testament scholar Johannes Weiss, for example, said that the teachings on revenge and loving one's enemies constituted "exceptional legislation.[16] Albert Schweitzer believed the Sermon on the Mount contained what he called an "interim ethic,"[17] for which reason it was on such a high level. Jesus' ethical proclamations were conditioned by an eschatological view of the world. The Sermon was to call people to repentance. When the end of the world is imminent, "unusual living" is expected. Paul's teaching on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7:25-31

13. Lapide, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 5.

14. Ibid., 4.

15. Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Meridan Books, 1956), 59.

16. Hans Windisch, *The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951), 30.

17. Albert Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1950), 55.

builds on the same assumption.

The question I wish to ask is then: "At what elevation is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount?" How lofty is this sermon, and is there any hope at all of living by the teachings it contains? Some do not consider this an important question, but I believe it is of utmost importance. It is important if we are to take the Sermon seriously, and it is important once we have decided to take the Sermon seriously. After we have examined what the Sermon itself says about attainability, I want to comment on a couple difficult verses in the Sermon pertaining to attainability and then go on to discuss three specific teachings in the Sermon that have been particularly troublesome—those on anger (Matt 5:21-26), non-retaliation toward evildoers (5:38-42), and judging others (7:1-5). I shall seek to interpret them as I think they were meant to be interpreted, making them more serviceable to Christians and non-Christians in today's world. At the end, I will have a final word to say about the elevation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

There is, as I have said, a widespread notion that this great compilation of Jesus' teaching is no more than an ideal, and that none of us, indeed, no one anywhere, can actually carry it out. We may get this idea from the Sermon itself. I think of verses such as 5:19, where one is warned about relaxing even the least of Jesus' commandments and teaching others to do the same; also the next verse in 5:20, where Jesus says our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, or we will never get into the kingdom of heaven; and, finally, the word in 5:48 about our need to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. John Knox said regarding this last verse: "If Jesus' words in Matthew 5:48, 'Be ye therefore perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect,' are taken at face value, they set a standard for our moral life which there is no possibility of our attaining."[18]

For many the teachings on anger, non-retaliation, and judging others add to the perception that this Sermon sets forth a code of conduct by which we cannot possibly live, giving us only an ideal we can at best approximate. Even in that beautiful passage of 6:25-32, where Jesus says: "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air…" we have a teaching lifting up the life style of an Elijah, or John the Baptist, and how many of us want to give up the comforts we have, even if they are modest comforts, and live like ascetics in the desert? Just how simple is a follower of Jesus expected to live? Reinhold Niebuhr says with reference to these verses: "No life can be lived in such concern for the physical basis of life."[19] And yet, at the end of this passage, it says that if we seek *first* God's kingdom and his righteousness, all these things will be ours as well (v. 33). Perhaps this is not a call to the ascetic life after all!

Now it must be admitted that there is something to be said in favor of idealistic teachings. It is laudable to set high goals and strive to attain them. People who do this come out considerably better than those setting low goals, or who set no goals at all. But something else can and does happen when people, young and old, meet up with impossible ideals. They give up trying to attain them, knowing that in the end they will fall short. The great teachings are allowed to remain, enshrined in books such as the Bible, but people make no at-

18. John Knox, "The Ethical Obligation in the Realm of Grace" *Shane Quarterly* vol. 15/2 (1954), 55.

19. Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 47.

tempt to live by them. As a result, these great teachings are put "out of service." This is a problem lying at the very heart of Matthew's Gospel, and it is what brings forth the sharp censure of the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23. Those sitting on Moses' seat expound great teachings, but they do not practice them (23:3).

I fear this is a problem with many today. It is always a lurking danger for preachers and teachers, but it affects parents and anyone else uttering lofty or censorious words on this subject or that, with reference to this person or that. People allow the Sermon on the Mount to remain a high ideal, meant perhaps for someone else, but not for them, and they conveniently ignore it. If we are good Lutherans, we are comforted by the certainty of our sinful state and God's infinite grace, believing that the latter together with a mustard-seed faith will save us in the end. In the 1930s a Chinese philosopher is reported to have said to a Westerner visiting Peking: "A man's religion does not represent what he is, but what he is not, and that the lower a man is the higher his religion is likely to be, to atone for his failure and lack."[20]

Some years ago when I was a pastor briefly, I had a woman in the congregation who had a very high view of Scripture. She was a good woman, active in the church and an excellent director of our Christian education program. One day she came to talk to me in my office, and the discussion turned to the passage in Mark 10:11 where Jesus, in expanding his teaching on marriage to the disciples, said to them: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her." I explained that this teaching was probably aimed at the man who divorces his wife *in order to marry* another woman, where a "love triangle" had developed, and the man had decided to leave his wife for another woman in waiting.[21] Jesus was not referring to a divorced man who at some later time married another woman, someone who in no way was responsible for the break-up of the first marriage. However, this woman, with her high view of Scripture, could not accept my interpretation. In her view, divorce and remarriage were wrong under any circumstances.

I was dumbfounded, since she herself had married a divorced man. This man's first marriage failed some years ago, and now rather recently he had met this woman in my church and the two married. No one saw anything wrong in the marriage. I certainly saw nothing wrong in it. I asked her if Jesus' teaching was that marriage to a divorced person was unacceptable under any circumstances, how could she justify what she and her husband had done? Her answer was that God would understand their weaknesses. What had happened, you see, was that a very elevated view of Scripture had led to Scripture no longer being an authority for her. So she had decided the difficult question of remarriage on her own, and then assumed that everything would be right in the end because of God's mercy and grace.

The Sermon itself has something quite different to say about attainability than what one obtains in the common perception. At its close is a clear word about the expectation Jesus, or Matthew, has that those hearing this sermon will, in fact, live in accordance with the teachings it sets forth. This is a very Jewish word, one that echoes Deuteronomy and the best of Rabbinic teaching, viz., that one

20. John Knox, "The Ethical Obligation in the Realm of Grace," 73; cf. Edwin Rogers Embree, "A Conversation in Peking," *The Atlantic Monthly* vol. 146 (1930), 561-568.

21. Lundbom, "What about Divorce?" *Covenant Quarterly*, vol. 36/4 (1978), 23.

must *do* what God has commanded. Read again the closing words of the Sermon:

> Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."
>
> (Matthew 7:21-23 NRSV)

Then comes the parable of the two houses, which concludes the Sermon.

> Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!
>
> (Matthew 7:24-27 NRSV)

These words coming at the climax of the Sermon could not be more clear. Those hearing Jesus' teaching are expected to do it. His teaching is no unattainable ideal; it is a doable recipe for holy living.[22] A climactic passage in Deuteronomy says the same about Deuteronomic law:

> For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it
>
> (Deuteronomy 30:11-14 RSV)

The Deuteronomic preacher closes by saying that doing the commands is nothing less than walking the road to life; not doing them is walking the road to death (Deut 30:15-19).

We have then in the Sermon no unattainable ideal, but rather a doable recipe for holy living. Pious talk is not enough (7:21); mighty works are not enough (7:22-23); hearing God's word is not enough (7:26-27). The bottom line is hearing and *doing*, which in biblical thought is always the bottom line. The great Pharisee Gamaliel II, who was Paul's teacher and is twice cited favorably in the book of Acts (5:33; 22:3), is reported to have said: "If a man's wisdom is greater than his deeds, his wisdom will be forgotton. But if his deeds are greater than his wisdom, then his wisdom will be remembered (cf. *Pirke Aboth* 3:22). Dietrich Bonhoeffer cited these words, and the thrust of his *Cost of Discipleship* was that only the one who obeys can believe, a strident attack on the "cheap grace" the German church was dispensing.

We need to give this Sermon another look, paying particular attention to verses that seem to support an unattainable ideal. The words in 5:19-20 can be dispensed with quickly:

> Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches other to do the same, will be

22. F. Schuele, "Living Up to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount: An Approach" in Robert J. Daly ed., *Christian Biblical Ethics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 206.

> called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
>
> (Matthew 5:19-20 NRSV)

Here Jesus says that one must not relax even the least of his commands, nor teach others to do so. Rabbis of the New Testament period distinguished between "light" and "heavy" precepts. For example, honoring one's parents (Deut 5:16), the Fifth Commandment, was considered a heavy precept; taking the mother bird with her young (Deut 22:6-7) was considered a light precept (Mishnah Hullin 12:5), an act that cost little, and was easily done.

What the least of Jesus' commands might have been is not stated. If I were to choose, I would select the one about not swearing oaths (5:33-37), which could be a restatement of the Third Commandment about not taking the Lord's name in vain (Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11; cf. Lev 19:12), otherwise an embellishment of the teaching regarding the taking of vows (Deut 23:21-23). Swearing empty oaths, commonly taken to be a minor infraction, was nevertheless censured by Jeremiah (Jer 4:2); considered to be a recurring problem by the Rabbis, the Essenes (CD xv 1-5), and preachers of Puritan New England; and it continues to be a problem today. Listen to the talk of people with whom you move about. Obviously, this teaching was and is easily broken. I am not referring here to the bearing of false witness (= perjury), which is the Ninth Commandment (Exod 20:15; Deut 5:20) and a different injunction entirely. I am referring to the use of God's name in an empty manner. Jesus says this command must be followed, and that it would be better if one does not utter an oath at all. He says, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No.'"

In the Decalogue the least command was frequently taken to be the one about keeping the Sabbath day holy (Exod 20:8-11; Deut 5:12-15). According to the Rabbis, this command had to be preached more than all the others because it was the easiest to break. Preachers in seventeenth century New England harped continually on Sabbath-breaking, for much the same reason. Today one hears few preachers inveighing against Sabbath violation, perhaps because they reckon it as being a command of lesser importance. But in Jesus' view, one does not keep only the more important commands; one keeps them all.[23] Jeremiah took the same view, inveighing also against a violation of the commandment on Sabbath observance (Jer 17:19-27).[24]

So far as the following word about exceeding the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees is concerned, we need only go to chapter 23 to see just how righteous these individuals were. The Pharisees had noble beginnings, but in Jesus' time their righteousness was hollow, for they expounded great principles but did not live by them. They were also overly legalistic and puffed up with self-righteousness, which is offensive to people in any age. God's new people, says Jesus, must seek a better righteousness. Jesus also wants this new people of God to attain a higher righteousness than the righteousness of the Gentiles, which doubtless left much to be desired (Matt 5:46-47). Here Jesus' teaching is little different from teachings of the Hebrew prophets, or teachings of reformers in any age.

Perhaps the preeminent verse supporting unattainability is 5:48, where Jesus says

23. Ibid., 207.

24. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 803.

that we must be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. This is a more difficult verse, but the problem has largely to do with the English word "perfect." The bar is raised here no higher than in the Old Testament, where Israelite people were told to be holy as the Lord their God was holy (Lev 19:2; cf. Deut 14:2, 21). First Peter 2:9 says the church is "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." In the verse here, the Greek word "τέλειός" means "perfect" in the sense of "whole, complete, fully constituted" (cf. LXX Deut 18:13); it means essentially the same as Hebrew תָּמִים, meaning "perfect, whole, complete, unblemished, blameless" (Deut 32:4 in relation to God; Exod 12:5 in relation to sacrificial lambs). Noah (Gen 6:9), Abraham (Gen 17:1), and Job (Job 1:1) were all "blameless," and Israel too was called to be "blameless" before God (Deut 18:13; Josh 24:14). None of these texts comes close to implying moral perfection, which would not have entered the mind of any ancient Israelite teacher, or any Jewish teacher of a later time.

I would now like to examine three of the most troublesome teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. They are grand teachings, and, rightly understood and put into their proper context, they are perfectly attainable. This is not to say that everyone can carry them out, or that any one person can carry them out all of the time. I am simply saying that these teachings are doable, giving credibility to Jesus' climactic words at the end of the Sermon.

Anger (5:21-26)

> You have heard that it was said to the men of old, "You shall not kill, and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, "you fool!" shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Make friends quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.
>
> (Matthew 5:21-26 RSV)

This first antithesis in the Sermon weighs anger over against murder and says that it is not simply murder that makes one liable to judgment, but also anger. Jesus wants to get behind this serious crime to the interior disposition causing it. He knows, and we know, that anger can and does lead to murder. It happened in the Cain and Abel story (Gen 4:5-8), and threatened to repeat in the story of Jacob and Esau (Gen 27:41-45), and probably would have, had not their mother intervened. It has happened countless times since.

When my wife and I were living in Beirut, now over 40 years ago, an article in the *Daily Star* told about two men who met one morning in the restaurant for breakfast, and after an argument broke out, the one killed the other. They were said to be friends. What happened is that after the two had finished eating, the one offered to pay for both breakfasts. The other man refused the offer, and slapping his lira on the table said he would pay for them both. An argument ensued, in this case enflamed by affronts to each man's honor, which, as anyone who has lived in the Arab world knows, is no trifle. The first man responded to money now lying on the table by physically attacking the other man,

who went tumbling to the floor. Not to be outdone, this man got up, went the short distance to his home, and returned with a pistol with which he shot his breakfast companion dead. Anger, combined here with an affront to honor, led to murder. The Lebanese court, it was later reported, attempted to enforce French law but was unable to prosecute the case because the assailant's honor had been impugned.

The words beginning in verse 22 are particularly troublesome: "But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment" (RSV). From this one might conclude that it is simply wrong to be angry, and that anyone getting angry is in the wrong. Every time I have taught the Sermon on the Mount to adults there has been someone in the group who says that Christians should not get angry, and this half-verse is cited. Now does Jesus really mean that all anger is wrong? If he did, no one could carry out his teaching, and everyone would be "liable to judgment." Incidentally, ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει ("liable he will be to judgment") means "judged guilty" or "condemned," not simply "be in danger of judgment." This is clarified by the prior usage in v. 21, where the one who murders stands condemned. But does the angry person also stand condemned? If the anger contemplates murder, yes, but every other anger?

The modern psychologist would be the first to tell us that a blanket prohibition against anger would surely be mistaken, whether against our brother, sister, or anyone else. For a long time now we have been told that it is healthy to express anger. Anger expressed is tension relieved. In fact, anger may be the only proper response to injustice and wrongdoing. We have also learned a good deal in recent years about internalized anger. There are people who cannot or will not become openly angry, but who harbor inner anger, which they may not reckon to be anger. But the psychologist knows, and we know, that internalized anger is far more dangerous than anger expressed openly. In the biblical story, Cain's anger was internalized. The text says: "So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell." Mayer Gruber has argued that the "fallen face" refers here to depression,[25] which probably means that Cain said nothing to his brother. However, the Lord knew Cain was angry and told him so, warning him that "sin was couching at the door" (Gen 4:4-7). So beware! The person who says nothing at all may be angrier than the person who shouts. People who have not learned to express their anger properly will finally reach a point where "the lid will blow off," which is what happened with Cain, who went on to murder his brother.

The Bible recognizes that anger in and of itself is not wrong. The psalmist says :"Be angry, but do not sin" (Ps 4:4), which is quoted and expanded upon in Ephesians 2:26: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger." I was taught this latter verse by my grandmother, and I have tried to live by it. I remember as a young boy going into my mother's bedroom before I went to sleep to get things right with her. With my wife, I seek to live by the same rule. The only problem is when you have an argument at 11:00 at night, just before going to bed. You need some time to cool off, and there is not much left of the day. The sun is long gone. Still, the rule is a good one.

The Bible gives three important teachings about anger: 1) that one must be *slow* to anger (Prov 14:29; 15:18; 16:32; 19:11; Eccl 7:9; Jas 1:19); 2) that anger

25. M. Gruber, "The Tragedy of Cain and Abel: A Case of Depression," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 69 (1978), 89-97.

must *not get out of control* (Prov 29:11; Ps 37:8: "Refrain from passionate anger"); and 3) that anger must be *short lived* (Eph 4:26). God is slow to anger (Exodus 34:6) and does not keep his anger forever (Pss 30:5; 103:9); but unlike human beings, his anger can burn with great intensity (Deut 32:22; 2 Kgs 22:17; Jer 7:20; 15:14; 17:4; 21:12). Anger in the Bible is compared to fire, and we all know what happens if fire gets out of control. A large number of people must be pressed into service to put it out. Protracted anger is dangerous because it does more harm to the one harboring it than the one against whom the anger is directed. But the Bible teaches nowhere that one cannot be angry. Also, there is such a thing as "righteous indignation." The prophets were angry (Jer 6:11; 15:17); Jesus was angry (Mark 3:5); Paul was angry (Acts 17:16); and we all, at one time or another, become angry.

What then is Jesus teaching us here in the Sermon? Besides an implied warning against anger that could lead to murder, an anger that must be disallowed in any and every case, Jesus seems to be concerned primarily with behavior that makes other people angry. The Greek verb ὀργίζω in the active voice means "make angry, provoke to anger, irritate,"[26] and although a passive form appears in our present verse, ὀργιζόμενος, the sense nevertheless requires "become provocative" rather than "become angry." I would translate verse 22a: "everyone who becomes provocative with his brother shall be liable to judgment." The danger is in making someone else angry by provocative words or actions, which can easily escalate into something worse. Jesus says one must refrain from this type of anger. Some ancient MSS add "without cause" (εἰκῇ), which gives the reading: "everyone who is angry with his brother without cause shall be liable to judgment." This is generally judged to be a secondary reading; nevertheless, it qualifies the anger and brings the interpretation in line with what I have proposed.

The Old Testament is far more concerned about "provocations to anger" than about "anger" itself. This is seen particularly on the theological level, where Israel is continually being censured for provoking Yahweh to anger. One finds this censure throughout Deuteronomy and Jeremiah (Deut 4:25; 9:7-8, 18, 22; 32:15-22; Jer 7:18-19; 25:6-7; 32:29-30, 32; 44:8).

In the New Testament, a good example of human provocation is found in Ephesians 6:4, where a similar Greek verb, παροργιζω, carries this meaning:[27] "Fathers, *provoke not* (μὴ παροργίζετε) your children *to anger*, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Here it is not the anger of the children that is being censured, but the provocation of the "fathers" (we might also add "mothers") causing the children's anger. Paul speaks a similar word in Colossians 3:21: "Fathers, do not provoke (ἐρεθίζετε) your children, lest they become discouraged."

The context in Matthew 5:21-26 confirms this interpretation. In the latter half of verse 22 the same thing is said only in different words: "whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council" (RSV). The Greek says "whoever says Ῥακά to his brother shall be liable to the Sanhedrin." The Greek word Ῥακά is a supreme word of insult (= Aramaic רֵיקָא, "empty"; Betz: "empty head!"), and the person using it knows he or she is being provocative. The Sanhedrin was the supreme Jewish council of 71 members in Jerusalem, presided over by the High Priest. The Sanhedrin would not likely hear a case simply involving someone's use

26. H. G. Liddle and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 1246.

27. Ibid., 1343.

of Ῥακά, but it would hear a serious case that began with a Ῥακά The verse goes on to embellish the idea further, saying that if you address your brother with another contemptuous word, Μωρέ ("You Fool"), you will be liable to "the hell of fire" (RSV). The Greek has "Gehenna" = "Valley of Ben Hinnom" (Jer 7:32; 19:6), which in the Intertestamental period had become a place of punishment for the wicked in the afterlife, contrasted with the "Paradise of delight" (4 Ezra 7:36; Apocalypse Baruch [II Baruch] 59:10; 83:13). The judgment here may then be eschatological.[28]

Jesus does not have trivial offenses in mind, rather provocations likely to escalate into something worse. In such cases, the person responsible for the provocation is in the wrong.[29] Stendahl[30] says that in verses 23-24 the other person has a (just) claim against him. The provocative individual will then be judged guilty, brought before the authorities, and punished, and his only recourse at this late stage is to settle things quickly, with or without a lawyer, before the heavy hand of judgment falls upon him. Jesus is not talking here about "righteous anger" or even the justified anger of someone wronged or oppressed. He is also not saying that one must acquiesce in every conflict or settle every litigation out of court. He is talking to people who knowingly and wrongfully provoke others to anger, telling them that when things escalate, as they tend to do, they will be the ones held liable. Such people had better make things right with their brother or sister, and do it before bringing their gift to the Lord's altar. So interpreted, this teaching is one anyone can follow, and for their own good had better follow.

28. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 221.

29. John L. McKenzie, "The Gospel According to Matthew" in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary II* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 71.

30. Krister Stendahl, "Matthew" in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, 776.

Non-retaliation toward evildoers (5:38-42)

> You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.
>
> (Matthew 5:38-42 RSV)

Here we are dealing with a situation in which someone has done you an injustice, and Jesus begins by saying that you are not to apply the *lex talionis*. But let us look at the injustices. None is of great magnitude; as a matter of fact, all are relatively minor. None has to do with bodily injury, much less loss of life. The first is a slap on the right cheek, which in the ancient world would be reckoned as a case of "insult." Jesus says that when someone insults you, you are not to respond in kind, i.e., you are not to slap him or her on the cheek. Yet ironically, he prescribes an action that will shame the other person, which is what turning the other cheek will do. One is to say, "Do it again! Here is my other cheek!" Paul, in discussing this teaching and the one following about being kind to one's enemies, understands the shaming intent perfectly. He cites Proverbs 25:21-22 and says that such an action "will heap burning coals upon [the adversary's] head" (Rom 12:20). The enemy will be nonplussed, and the conflict will likely not escalate.

The second indignity is also relatively minor, although it probably violates Old Testament law and ordinary common sense. If someone takes your tunic (= a shirt worn next to the skin), you are to offer him your cloak (= outer garment) as well. Why is the person taking the shirt off your back? Probably because you have incurred a debt, and it is being seized as a pledge. Or maybe you have not paid off your debt. The text says it is a legal action. Very likely you are poor, or else the creditor would be seizing something more valuable.

A law in Deuteronomy 24:10-13 aims at protecting the poor from over-zealous creditors who want their cloak when they have nothing else to give them. The cloak is usually the last thing a person is forced to surrender, making the seizure of a tunic in Jesus' example extreme. Anyone hearing this example would see it as extreme. According to Old Testament law, a widow's cloak could not be taken as a pledge under any circumstances (Deut 24:17). If you happened to be poor, the creditor was obliged to return the cloak before nightfall, since you had nothing else to sleep in (Deut 24:12-13). Garments were commonly given as pledges (Prov 20:16; 27:13), and in the Old Testament those who callously seize them from the poor come in for strong censure. Amos says that people in Israel "lay themselves down beside every altar, upon garments taken in pledge" (Amos 2:8). Eliphaz accuses Job, saying, "You have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing, and stripped the naked of their clothing" (Job 22:6). Hence, by offering to surrender your coat when the greedy creditor asks for your shirt, you will be shaming him, and more than likely he will not take it. If so, end of conflict.

Being forced to walk a mile was another indignity, this one having come with the Roman occupation of Palestine. Roman soldiers could compel a non-Roman subject to carry his equipment one mile.[31] Recall Simon, the man from Cyrene, who as a bystander along the road was compelled to carry Jesus' cross (Matt 27:32). When such a thing happens, Jesus says you are to show your disdain for this loathsome practice by offering to do even more than what the person asks. I have done this often with over-zealous border inspectors searching my luggage, helping them to see even more than for what they are looking. It has never failed to hasten the end of the indignity, but today, of course, you can no longer do this.

Giving money to beggars and lending must also be understood as outlays on a very small scale. Beggars typically receive only crumbs or small change. Jesus is not talking about giving in to every request for money. He is simply telling his followers to be compassionate toward the poor, which is no more than what Deuteronomic law requires. There one is admonished continually to share one's resources with the stranger, orphan, and widow, also with the Levite in town, who has no inheritance and in the seventh century B.C. is out of a job because worship has been centralized in Jerusalem and the local sanctuaries are closed down (Deut 12:12; 16:11, 14).

Luther said one must surely give to the poor, but one is not required to give what they ask for.[32] Calvin, too, said the following:

> None but a fool will stand upon the words so as to maintain that we must yield to our opponents what they demand before coming into a court of law; for such compliance would more strongly inflame the minds of wicked men to robbery and extortion; and we

31. Ibid., 777.

32. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*, 108.

> know, that nothing was farther from the design of Christ.[33]

I have followed Luther's principle at times when I was pastor of a church, since the church, as every pastor knows, is a magnet for panhandlers. Aggressive panhandling comes close to being robbery. I would typically not give beggars the $50.00 or more for which they were asking but would offer to buy them food or to fill up their car with gas. Sometimes my offers were refused. If the person accepted, I would take them to a nearby store or eatery and buy them a sandwich and something to drink or take them to a filling station and have gas put in their car. Some of these individuals were doubtless panhandlers, but often you cannot be sure.

What is important about this teaching on non-retaliation is that it must not become a hard and fast principle made to apply to every conceivable indignity and violence done to you, your family, or your country, many of which are infinitely more grave. Nor is Jesus issuing a sweeping call for pacifism in war, nor would he agree to an enemy having license to do any sort of violence to you. One does have a right to self-defense (cf. Luke 22:36). There are grievous evils in our world that one must resist and, in certain instances, fight against. Jesus is talking about not applying the law of retaliation to insult and other indignities one can handle, a teaching that is eminently doable.

We learn from the Roman historian, Tacitus, that even Roman leaders practiced the principle of non-retaliation in certain circumstances. Germanicus, the adopted son of the Emperor Tiberius (A.D. 14-37), after being savagely attacked by his rival Piso, was said to have not returned in kind. Tacitus gives this report of Piso coming to Germanicus on the island of Rhodes: "Though aware of Piso's attacks on him, Germanicus behaved so forgivingly that when a storm was driving Piso on to the rocks—so that his death could have been put down to accident—Germanicus sent warships to rescue his enemy."[34]

It is true, of course, that the non-retaliation (or non-violent) principle here in the Sermon has been applied to large-scale injustices. I think, for example, of Gandhi's actions against the British and Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights activity in the United States, both of which achieved extraordinary results. One therefore cannot and should not be dismissive regarding broader application of this principle. That having been said, one must beware of adversaries, great and small, who lack the moral consciousness presupposed by Scripture, or who are bereft of any moral principle. Such people exist at all times and in all cultures, which means this principle of non-retaliation cannot be made into a universal. The principle as presented here in the Sermon clearly has smaller injustices in view, and as such is doable by anyone at any time.

Judging others (7:1-5)

> Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.
>
> (Matthew 7:1-5 RSV)

33. Ibid., 108-109.

34. Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1956), 103.

This teaching on judging other people has to be one of the most widely misunderstood and misquoted teachings of the Bible. I have discussed these verses often in adult study groups over the years and almost every time there has been at least one person present who speaks up and reduces the saying to the first two words, "Judge not," or else interprets verse 1 to mean, "Judge not, and then you will not be judged." Jesus' words are thus interpreted to mean that Christians ought make no judgments at all, which is a gross misunderstanding of what the teaching is all about.

One must not simply reduce the teaching to the first two words, "Judge not," or use the words in verse 1 to support the notion that judging people is something Christians must never do. Elton Trueblood in his great little book of some years ago, *The Humor of Christ*,[35] got the teaching right. He recognized that everyone has to make judgments and that human life loses its dignity if we cease to make judgments. What is more, judging is in and of itself not wrong. Life requires that we make judgments, not only upon evils of various description, but upon bad behavior and people who behave badly. There is the oft-quoted remark that "God hates the sin but loves the sinner." That may be true, but the New Testament, and even more the Church Fathers, make it ever so clear that God does not consign sin to hell but people who persist in sin to hell.

The way one reads and interprets the Greek idiom in verse 1 makes all the difference between a teaching yielding good sense, and one that does not. The verse should not be read, "Do not judge people, for then you yourself will not be judged," as if to say, the only way one can escape judgment is by not judging others, which is absurd. It means rather: "Do not judge in such a manner that your judgment ends up coming down upon you, instead of upon the person you are judging." Here again the context makes everything clear. Jesus is talking about hypocrisy, which is spelled out in verses 2-5, and is given larger treatment in chapter 23. He is talking about people who pounce upon others, yet have in themselves the same or a similar problem that is infinitely greater. Here is where Trueblood sees humor in Jesus' teaching. In a fine example of oriental exaggeration, Jesus says one must first take the log out of one's own eye before removing the speck from a brother's eye. Our interpretation here should add "a sister's eye." In other words, "Get your own problem cleared up; then talk to other people about theirs!"

Much good work in the church and outside has been undone by self-righteous people who police everyone, family members, would-be friends, people they barely know, about one misstep or another, and then make exceptions for themselves. As a result, their judgments are not listened to, but we still have to put up with them. Hypocritical behavior causes entire churches to lose credibility. The prophet Hosea discovered to his sorrow that because hypocrisy had permeated the whole of Israelite society, the Lord himself would have to step in and judge the people (Hos 4:1-10).[36] All were corrupt—king, prophets, priests, and people. No one was capable of making judgments. Suspension of law for hypocritical behavior is a strong biblical theme. We encounter it in the Judah and Tamar story (Gen 38), and in the New Testament account of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11). Jesus then is

35. Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 60-61.

36. Lundbom, "Contentious Priests and Contentious People in Hosea IV 1-10," *Vetum Testamentum*, vol. 36 (1986), 52-70.

not telling people not to judge. Rather he is warning them to be ever so careful that the judgments they make do not end up coming down upon their own heads. The same applies to us, and is thus another teaching we can and must follow.

How then shall we take the Sermon on the Mount? I have argued that the Sermon is doable. Yet I also want to retain some tension between what Jesus expects and what we often find ourselves doing. In my view, this Sermon is meant to stretch us, and the tension it contains is only enough to make us into healthy, complete, and mature followers of Jesus Christ. Duncan Derrett[37] says that Matthew's listeners were like athletes, seventy-five percent of whom were unfit. He quotes Epictetus who said that the true athlete is one who can meet the unusual tests and win. According to this view, Jesus is calling many of us to exercise class.

I prefer comparing Jesus to a doctor who tells you to do something you think you cannot do. Let me close with a personal word. Ten years ago I had both hips replaced. After the first surgery, on the same day, the doctor came into my room and told me he wanted me to get out of bed and stand on my feet. I said I could not possibly do that. However, he and the nurse provided help, and with effort I did stand briefly on my two feet. During the next few days I had to walk to the door of my room, then a short distance down the hospital corridor, and later I had to do therapy exercises in a rehabilitation room. I remember wishing on some of those days that the nurses and therapists would forget to come and leave me in my bed. Many times I thought I could not do what was being asked, but with effort, and with help from the therapist, I did do it. In each case it was a "stretch," but that is how I regained my health, was able to walk again, and became the whole person I so much wanted to be.

I remember two very elderly women in the therapy room who were also being exercised. One had to be 90 or more. She cried at her therapist, "I can't do it." I felt so sorry for her. The therapist was a compassionate man but someone who in earlier days had trained the famed Romanian gymnasts. He remained firm, saying: "If you do not try, you will never walk again." The woman dried her tears and with effort took a few steps. As the days went on she progressed, even as I progressed. I do not know how things finally turned out for her, but I imagine that she too was able to walk well enough to return home.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is meant to stretch us. Jesus asks us to do more than we think we can do, but nothing he asks is impossible. As a good teacher and also the good doctor that he was, he knew that his disciples must rise above mediocrity to become light and salt in the world. Our world today needs nothing less than teachers who stretch the minds of their students and students who catch the vision and go on to do more than they ever thought they could do.

37. J. Duncan Derrett, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Manual for Living* (Northampton: Pilkington Press, 1994), 25.

From Honor Challenge to False Prophecy: Rereading Jeremiah 28's Story of Prophetic Conflict in Light of Social-Science Models[1]

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The story of Jeremiah and Hananiah is perhaps the Bible's classic narrative about prophetic conflict. Unfortunately, many readers and interpreters overlook the details in the exchange between the central characters in the story and instead look to the end of the story to see what it says about the phenomenon of false prophecy in ancient Israel. This is understandable, especially when Jeremiah 28 is read, first of all, theologically and, secondly, canonically in light of such texts as Deuteronomy 18:18-22. These verses, situated as they are in Israel's ostensive early history, are ordinarily understood as the criteria for determining true or false prophecy. Thus, later interpreters will come to think of those intermediaries who do such things as speak in the name of other gods, or speak presumptuously a word that does not come from YHWH, or pronounce an oracle that does not come true, as false prophets. And false prophets shall die. However, what I propose here is that the details of the narrative in Jeremiah 28 suggest that what is at stake in the scenes between Hananiah and Jeremiah is not some abstract theological principle but honor; and that a particular social-science model provides a useful lens through which to reread this narrative of prophetic conflict, so that even before the passage of time validates Jeremiah's message, audiences come to see him as an honorable person in the community and a faithful spokesperson of YHWH.

We are fundamentally social beings who live in a particular context, and our work of interpreting the Bible does not take place in a vacuum. It is also a fallacy to think that anyone is able to offer an entirely objective interpretation of a (biblical) text. Even practitioners of the historical-critical method do well to identify the various factors that comprise their social location (gender, race, ethnicity, religious commitment, age, education, class, cultural traditions, and the like) and to be self-aware of how these aspects of their being shape the way they read and understand the Bible. The social-scientific study of the Bible appeared as an important, complementary methodology in the later decades of the twentieth century.[2] Social-science critics

1. This project was supported by a Summer Research Fellowship from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, Crawfordsville, Indiana 47933.

2. See John H. Elliott, *What Is Social-Scientific Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 17-35.

are careful to recognize and admit that differences exist between the interpreter's context (social location) and the context of the biblical text and its author.[3] As western readers and interpreters of the Bible in the twenty-first century, we live in a social, political, religious, and cultural context significantly different from the world of the Bible. A principle goal of social-scientific criticism is to understand the text in terms of the social and cultural system in which it was written. As Elliott states, this method is intended "to yield an understanding of what authors said and meant within the contours of their own environment."[4] In order to find out what a text meant in its original context, we need to have some familiarity with the social and cultural world of the Bible. Learning about the values of honor and shame in the ancient world will better allow us to hear and understand a biblical text as its original audience would have experienced it in their particular context.

It is my thesis that what we witness in Jeremiah 28 is Jeremiah and Hananiah engaged in (1) a defense of honor, as a final result of which (2) Hananiah is dishonored and revealed to be a liar. By employing the honor/shame model for interpretation, we can better understand the cultural concerns and social circumstances that gave rise to the formulation of the narrative as it has been preserved, as well as its goal or purpose. The primary goal of the exchange between Jeremiah and Hananiah is to resolve an immediate crisis over prophetic leadership in Judah and Jerusalem at the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E. and to restore order to the threatened community. By his success in this interaction with Hananiah, Jeremiah shows himself to be an honorable person whose actions conform to the social standards of the day and whose truthful speech represents the values of Judean society. I will introduce briefly and examine several features of this model, apply them as reading lenses to the biblical text of Jeremiah 28, and indicate how rereading this familiar narrative of prophetic conflict in light of them contributes to a more authentic and culturally aware understanding of the narrative.

It is unclear at what point in time the notion of false prophets/false prophecy appeared in ancient Israel. I imagine that a secondary contribution of this study may be to ground more clearly the location of the notion of false prophecy within the cultural context of ancient Israel and its literary tradition, in particular, along a trajectory *from* Jeremiah 28 *to* Deuteronomy 18. Theology grows out of a specific cultural reality and the particular social experience of a community. My suggestion is that the *theological* reflection on the phenomenon of false prophecy that was later canonized in Deuteronomy 18 had its origins in the *cultural* context of Judah in the late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C.E. The Book of Jeremiah includes frequent use of "*sheqer*" ("falsehood, lie") and frequently associates the concept with prophets or other intermediaries.[5] Thus, it may be that the concern over "false prophecy" and "false prophets" arose around the time that the Book of Jeremiah was being composed or redacted, that is, sometime during sixth century B.C.E. (interestingly, this was also the probable time for the redaction of the book of Deuteronomy). Also, no other book in the Hebrew Bible takes such a critical stance against "other" prophets and their message as does Jeremiah. Something, apparently, was going on at this time that brought this concern to the center of at-

3. Ibid., 37.

4. Ibid., 14.

5. Jer 5:31; 6:13; 8:10; 20:8; 23:14, 25-26, 32; 27:10, 14-16; 28:15; 29:9, 21, 23, 31.

tention. It is less than certain that Jeremiah 28 illustrates the principles or criteria enumerated in Deuteronomy 18. To the contrary, I think it may be better to see the book of Jeremiah as a stage along the way toward the development of the notion of "false prophecy." And apparently only by the time of the LXX was the "false prophet" idea sufficiently understood that the label could make its way into the biblical tradition (*pseudoprophetes* is used of Hananiah in the LXX [Jer 35:1]; beyond Jeremiah, the only other prophetic book in which a form of this word occurs is Zechariah, where the Hebrew text reads *nevi'im* [prophets]).

In the Hebrew text of the book of Jeremiah, Hananiah is not explicitly labeled a false prophet but rather, and importantly, as one who lies to the people and leads them to trust in a falsehood (*sheqer*). The difference may be subtle, but it is important, and it suggests that something other than an exclusively theological reading of the text should be undertaken to shed additional light on this dramatic exchange. Truth-telling and lying affect social order and solidarity.

The biblical writer underscores the integrity of Jeremiah. Such a favorable portrayal of Jeremiah serves the purpose of showing Jeremiah to be an honorable figure and the one to whom, in this exchange with Hananiah, not only the people of Jerusalem and Judah, but the nations as well (Jeremiah 27), should give ear. By the way the narrator has crafted the episode it was clear to all concerned that Jeremiah, not Hananiah, was to be identified as the prophet of YHWH whose word they should follow. There are obvious clues in the text, such as when Jeremiah warns the leaders of the nations of those who "prophesy falsely" (Jer 27:14; cf. v.9, 16) and when Jeremiah calls Hananiah a liar (Jer 28:15). But there are other clues that are evident when we reread the text in its cultural context, and it is to these cultural interests that we will turn.

Anthropologically speaking, intermediaries such as these figures named in Jeremiah 27–29 appear only in those societies where certain conditions are met, including the necessity of the services such figures provide. According to Wilson, they are most active when communities are experiencing social instability brought about by such experiences as economic upheaval, natural disasters, cross-cultural contact, and war.[6] Since many pre-modern societies interpreted such negative events as evidence of divine displeasure, it was precisely under these conditions that a community would seek out means for communicating with the gods in order to discover the divine will and perhaps appease the divine wrath. It comes as no surprise, then, to witness a surging number of prophets at work in Judah in the late seventh and early sixth centuries. Such a volatile situation was further confused by the competition between intermediaries, each claiming to speak the word from YHWH. Jeremiah 28 narrates one encounter between two of these opposing prophets, Jeremiah and Hananiah.

Social science models: a contribution to interpretation

Much has already been done to bring the anthropological model of honor and shame to the interpretation of the Bible, with the majority of early work being done in New Testament studies.[7] However, since culture

6. Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 31.

7. See especially Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural*

changes slowly, it is here presumed that the social world of the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israel's monarchic period is continuous with that of the New Testament. Honor and shame have been recognized as fundamental values in the ancient Mediterranean world.[8] Honor, which may be either ascribed (inherited) or acquired, is understood to be one's own claim to worth within a society, together with a recognition of that claim to value by others; that is, one's claim to status must be publicly recognized. Halvor Moxness has put it quite succinctly, writing that honor is "fundamentally the public recognition of one's social standing."[9] On the one hand, ascribed honor ordinarily refers to that status one gets by birth: the higher in the village's social hierarchy one's family of birth, the higher one's honor ranking. Acquired honor, on the other hand, is the claim to worth and its social recognition to which one is entitled as a result of excelling in the on-going social interaction known as challenge and riposte. A *challenge* is any effort to impinge on the honor of another. Challenges typically take the form of a word, action, or gesture and may be either positive (a compliment or gift) or negative (insult, threat, physical assault). *Riposte* refers to the response, retort, or reaction from the one challenged and ordinarily appears as either a refusal or inability to respond, a rejection of the challenge, or a counter-challenge. Depending upon how successful one is in these exchanges, one's honor ranking may be modestly enhanced or diminished. If one is able to best another in challenge and riposte, and thereby increase one's own honor, the other suffers a corresponding diminution in honor.[10] Since many anthropologists argue that honor is at stake in nearly every social interaction in Mediterranean society (in antiquity and into the present), an interpretation of the confrontation between Jeremiah and Hananiah would benefit from the application of the honor/shame model and attention to the social interaction of challenge and riposte.

If an interaction is to present a challenge to one's honor, two conditions must be met. First, an honor challenge can only take place between social equals. Secondly, recalling that one's honor ranking is a claim that is publicly acknowledged, the challenge must be issued publicly.[11] With regard to the first condition, the figures of Jeremiah and Hananiah are presented in the book of

Anthropology, Third Edition, Revised and Expanded (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey. "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. by Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 25-65; and the important anthropological studies in J. G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) and Julian Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem, or the Politics of Sex: Essays in the Anthropology of the Mediterranean*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, vol. 19 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

8. Malina, *New Testament World*, 27-57; see also David G. Gilmore, "Anthropology of the Mediterranean Area," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 11 (1982), 175-205.

9. Halvor Moxness, "Honor and Shame," in Richard Rohrbaugh, ed., *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 20.

10. Malina and Neyrey, "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts," 30-31. See also "Honor/Shame" in John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, eds., *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning: A Handbook* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 95-104.

11. Malina, *New Testament World*, 33-35.

Jeremiah as equals. Prophets may function at any level of the social structure and may be found in connection with any group in the society. Wilson uses the categories of *central* and *peripheral* to describe the social standing of a given prophet relative to the center of the society's social, religious, and political power structure (one's social location).[12] In this scheme, those prophets who carry out their activities close to the centers of power may be called central intermediaries or central prophets. These figures often play regular roles in the religious establishment and enjoy a certain amount of social prestige and political power. They control political succession, maintain the status quo or regulate social change, and represent the official link between their societies and the divine realm. At other end of the spectrum are peripheral prophets who are far removed from the centers of power and who tend to operate instead on the margins of society. As such, these figures usually have no authority within the society as a whole and possess (in the view of those at the center) little status or political influence. In their role as intermediaries, these prophets often seek to improve their status and that of their support group and to encourage social change.

It should be noted that the distinction between these two types (central and peripheral) is not absolute; some intermediaries may be seen as either peripheral or central, depending on the point of reference used to make the classification. From the standpoint of society's religious and political elite (that is, from the center of power), prophets on the fringes of the society are indeed peripheral. They are viewed as nuisances and tolerated but can usually be ignored because they are considered to have no real political or religious power. On the other hand, from the standpoint of the marginalized group supporting a peripheral prophet, that prophet is of central importance since he represents a means by which the group may address the whole society. Finally, central intermediaries may have once been peripheral figures, or vice versa. Such may have been the experience of Isaiah of Jerusalem, as well as Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 28

Determining the social location of Jeremiah is notoriously difficult but a case can be made for interpreting him as a peripheral prophet. To begin the application of this honor/shame model to Jeremiah 28, one learns that while the center of Judean society is Jerusalem, Jeremiah comes from the city of Anathoth some 5 km northwest of Jerusalem. Geography alone, however, does not make Jeremiah a peripheral intermediary. In biblical tradition, Anathoth is remembered as the village to which Abiathar, one of David's high priests, was exiled at the time of Solomon's succession to the throne (1 Kgs 2:26). A supporter of Adonijah in his quest for David's throne, Abiathar is one of the losers when Solomon eventually becomes king. He escapes a death sentence but is banished from Jerusalem, the center of political, economic, and religious power. Jeremiah's association with "the priests who were in Anathoth, in the land of Benjamin" (Jer 1:1) makes him an ideological outsider to the Jerusalem establishment and may account for the prophet's critical stance against the Jerusalem temple, priesthood, and monarchy that typifies Jeremiah's oracles and sermons throughout the book.

As Wilson notes, a peripheral intermediary must have a support group of some kind for validation, developmental

12. *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, 38-40, 69-88; *idem*, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament* GBS (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 74-76.

guidance, and vocational support.[13] In Jeremiah's case, various individuals come to his aid, including Baruch son of Neriah, his scribe, and Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian eunuch who rescued Jeremiah from the cistern (Jeremiah 32). There are also more politically connected individuals named throughout the text who appear to support Jeremiah to one degree or another. In Jeremiah 26, "the officials and all the people" rise in defense of Jeremiah against the death sentence recommended by the priests and the prophets (26:11). At the very end of chapter 26, a certain Ahikam son of Shaphan enters in support of Jeremiah. According to the Deuteronomistic History, this was an important family—yet, perhaps, not a family with powerful, central connections in the administration of Judah after the death of Josiah in 609 B.C.E. Shaphan was a royal secretary to Josiah and appears in 2 Kings 22 when the temple repairs are begun. Ahikam, his son, was among the officials sent by Josiah to consult YHWH through the intermediation of the prophetess Huldah. A third prominent member of this family is Gedaliah, the son of Ahikam, who was appointed governor over the people remaining in Judah by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. This was a family of central importance during the reign of Josiah which, apparently, fell out of favor during the reigns of Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. This appears to point to a fractured political leadership in Judah in the years leading up to the Babylonian conquest and exile. Jeremiah, a peripheral prophet from Anathoth, seems to have found support from others in Jerusalem who had once been powerful allies of the central administration but who were similarly marginalized, relative to the monarchy, priesthood, and prophetic advisors, in the years after 609 B.C.E.

13. *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, 51-52.

It is similarly difficult to determine Hananiah's social location, although in his case the problem is the paucity of information available about him. This Hananiah appears only here in the Hebrew Bible (other Hananiahs appear elsewhere). In Jeremiah 28 he appears in a central location, the Jerusalem temple, in the company of the priests and "all the people." Read in the context of Jeremiah 27, however, it is reasonable to conclude that the narrator intends for the reader to see in Hananiah a particular example of those prophets, soothsayers, and diviners against whom Jeremiah rails in chapter 27. These are all central intermediaries, providing counsel to the kings of the surrounding nations (27:3-11), King Zedekiah of Judah (27:12-15), and to the priests of the Jerusalem sanctuary (27:16-17).

More importantly, however, is the *way* in which the storyteller has introduced Jeremiah and Hananiah. While few of the following observations are entirely novel, most interpreters overlook their fuller social significance.[14] First, both figures are introduced as "prophets" throughout the chapter. (Recall that in the LXX, Hananiah is introduced as a false prophet [*pseudoprophetes*] in Jeremiah 28:1. Nowhere in the LXX version of the story is "prophet" used as a title, as it is in the Hebrew Bible [e.g., "the prophet Hananiah," or "the prophet Jeremiah"; see LXX Jeremiah 35]). Second, each prophet bears a fine Yahwistic name: according to BDB, "Jeremiah" means something like "YHWH loosens" or "YHWH exalts" (BDB 941), while "Hananiah" means "YHWH has been gracious" (BDB 337). Third, each prophet comes from a similar geographic

14. See already Burke O. Long, "Social Dimensions of Prophetic Conflict," *Semeia 21: Anthropological Perspectives on Old Testament Prophets* (Robert C. Culley and Thomas W. Overholt, eds.; Chico: Scholars Press, 1982), 42-44.

location. While Jeremiah comes from the village of Anathoth, Hananiah is associated with Gibeon. That is, not only do both prophets come from *outside* Jerusalem, they also both come to Jerusalem from villages in the old tribal territory of Benjamin. Holladay observes that "the propinquity of the origins of the two prophets might have sharpened the tension of their exchange."[15] Fourth, both prophets appear as messengers of YHWH, with each prophet introducing oracles with the messenger formula: "Thus says YHWH." In fact, what distinguishes the one prophet from the other in this narrative is solely the content of the message each gives.

All of this supports the claim that the honor challenge in Jeremiah 28 is between equals and is, therefore, a genuine challenge to which Jeremiah must respond. It is also clear from the text of Jeremiah 28 that the exchange between the two prophets is no private matter but a public encounter, thus meeting the requirement of the second condition that the interaction in which one's honor is challenged must be public. According to 28:1, Hananiah addressed Jeremiah "in the house of YHWH, in the presence of [literally, "in the eyes of"] the priests and all the people." A nearly identical scenario is set in verse 5, introducing Jeremiah's reply. Finally, Jeremiah 28:7, 11 further underscore the public nature of this exchange, referring to "the hearing [literally, "ears," verse 7] or presence ["in the eyes of," verse 11] of all the people."

Chapter 27 provides the context for interpreting the honor challenge in Jeremiah 28. The setting is, ostensibly, Jerusalem in 597 B.C.E., during the reign of Jehoiakim (according to the Hebrew Bible), where Jeremiah appeared wearing "bonds and bars" to symbolize "the yoke of the king of Babylon" and addressed envoys from the surrounding nations, announcing to them that "all these lands" have been given by YHWH into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon. Submission to Babylon would mean remaining in one's homeland, whereas those who rebel against Babylon would be punished by means of the sword, famine, and pestilence "until [YHWH] has destroyed them by his [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand." Jeremiah further announced that those intermediaries who had counseled "you shall not serve the king of Babylon" were prophesying a lie/falsehood (*sheqer*). Next, Jeremiah addressed Zedekiah directly, advising the same submission to Babylon and promising similar national deliverance and survival for Judah. Finally, Jeremiah addressed the priests and "all the peoples," warning them of prophets who speak falsely concerning the temple vessels remaining in Jerusalem and say that the temple vessels would not be taken away.

Thus, when Hananiah appears with a prophetic message that stands in direct contradiction to that of Jeremiah, the stage is set for an honor challenge. Publicly, Hananiah challenges Jeremiah by delivering a counter-message: Jeremiah is wrong about Babylon. He does not call Jeremiah a liar, or suggest that Jeremiah speaks falsely. The audience, however, is faced with two apparently legitimate but conflicting prophetic words. Jeremiah replies (his riposte) with a wish that Hananiah's message were right, but launches immediately into the outline of a specific criterion for determining an authentic prophetic word: a prophecy of peace can only be validated (and must be) by its fulfillment; a prophecy of judgment or destruction requires no such validation. Jeremiah, in essence, has met the challenge offered by Hananiah, and, in fact, has raised the stakes by introducing the necessity of fulfillment for Hananiah's

15. William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 127-128.

prophecy of peace.

Two observations are in order about what follows next in the story. At first, Hananiah says nothing; he is effectively silenced by Jeremiah. When, however, Hananiah does finally respond, he becomes physical, seizing the yoke Jeremiah has been sporting upon his neck and breaking it. His actions are accompanied by the words: "Thus says YHWH: Just like this I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar the King of Babylon within two years from upon the back of the neck of all the nations." Then Jeremiah departs (Jer 28:11). At this point, it is likely that modern, western readers of the story will interpret this exit as a defeat for Jeremiah: Hananiah has apparently won the game, and Jeremiah has lost honor. This would not have been the case, however, in the honor/shame culture of antiquity. Unable to match wits (which is what challenge-riposte actually tests), Hananiah resorted to violence. Hananiah's temporary silence, followed by his escalation of the exchange beyond mere words to violence, would suggest to the audience that Jeremiah had, in a sense, already been victorious.[16]

Not only does Hananiah contradict the message Jeremiah announces, he also assaults the prophet. He violates Jeremiah's personal space when he reaches out and seizes the wooden yoke resting on Jeremiah's neck and breaks it. So, not only does Hananiah challenge Jeremiah verbally (by way of the direct contradiction of messages), he also attacks him physically. And in an honor/shame culture, as Malina and Neyrey note, "a physical affront is a challenge to one's honor; unanswered it becomes a dishonor in the judgment of the people who witness the affront."[17] All of this, too, happens very publicly. It may also be significant that the assault attacks the head (neck) of Jeremiah. The yoke, of course, functions as a symbol for the submission of the nations to Babylon. Just as an oxen lowers his head to assume the yoke, so do the nations and their leaders bow before the authority of Nebuchadnezzar. It is an expression of dishonor that Hananiah wishes to deny. Malina and Neyrey observe the following, which may be used to interpret the treatment of Jeremiah by Hananiah in this story:

> Honor is frequently symbolized by certain bodily features and the treatment given one's physical person. A person's body is normally a symbolized replication of the social values of honor. The head and front of the head (face) play prominent roles. …Honor is displayed when the head is crowned, anointed, touched, or covered. Dishonor, however, is symbolized when the head is uncovered or made bare by shaving and when it is cut off, struck, or slapped.[18]

To this, one might add bowing—metaphorically—in submission to another authority. For Hananiah to seize the yoke resting upon Jeremiah's neck is to challenge the latter's honor, even as it represents a refusal of Jeremiah's message from YHWH.

Has Jeremiah suffered dishonor at, quite literally, the hands of Hananiah? Jeremiah departs apparently in order to return another day to the temple complex, freshly commissioned with another word from YHWH and now saddled with an answer to Hananiah's physical assault, as well as

16. Bruce J. Malina and Richard R. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, second edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 372.

17. "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts," 35.

18. Ibid., 35.

with an iron yoke and a new challenge to Hananiah. He answers Hananiah's earlier violent affront: "Listen, Hananiah, YHWH has not sent you, and you have caused this people to trust in a lie" (28.15). Malina and Neyrey indicate that "lying and deception are inherently challenging" since "to deceive or lie is to deprive another of respect, to refuse to show honor, and to humiliate…in the competition for honor." They continue, however, with the observation that "lying is not a dishonorable action for the one who lies, but rather a challenge."[19] Hananiah has challenged Jeremiah by speaking falsely. In essence, in his next riposte Jeremiah engages in a bit of name-calling, and with only the slightest subtlety, calls Hananiah a liar, which is, in fact, "a great public dishonor."[20] At stake in this exchange is the truth, not as some philosophical concept, but as a social good. The people gathered in Jerusalem ("insiders"), and most certainly the king and the priests, were entitled to the truth, the authentic word of YHWH.[21] According to Jeremiah, by failing to speak truthfully Hananiah acted dishonorably and violated the social norms on which the community depended for its stability.

Thus, by becoming violent and by telling a lie, in essence Hananiah has issued another counter challenge to Jeremiah. In order to maintain his honor and keep the game of challenge and riposte going, Jeremiah is obligated to respond. He does this by publicly declaring the truth to all, "Listen Hananiah, YHWH has not sent you, and you have caused this people to trust in a lie…within this year you will be dead."

In this rereading of Jeremiah 28 I have analyzed the exchange between Jeremiah and Hananiah using the social-science model of honor/shame in order to expand our understanding of this story in its ancient cultural context. A case can be made for the propriety of reading Jeremiah 28 as an honor challenge, which results in a grant of honor to Jeremiah and the loss of honor for Hananiah. One of the outcomes of the narrator's work has been to portray Jeremiah as an honorable figure in society who, by this interaction and ritual, preserves his reputation by engaging Hananiah in a game of challenge and riposte—and being victorious. Jeremiah's success is further demonstrated by Hananiah's separation from the community by death, a development that significantly reduces the threat of "other prophets" in Jerusalem (according to Jer 37:19, Jeremiah's opponents have disappeared and his is the lone prophetic voice in the ear of Zedekiah).[22] When Jeremiah labels Hananiah a liar on the basis of the content of his prophesy, he insinuates that the word Hananiah speaks is not a word commanded by YHWH. It is not too much to imagine that out of this social interaction in Jeremiah 28 there eventually arose among the leaders in exilic or post-exilic Israel the notion of false prophecy (a capital offense), and of a "false prophet," who does not speak the true word of YHWH must (following Hananiah) also be subjected to the death sentence.

19. Ibid., 37.

20. Malina, *New Testament World*, 42.

21. Malina and Neyrey, "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts," 37.

22. Already in the last part of Jeremiah 29, a certain prophet named Shemaiah is rebuked for also prophesying when, in fact, he had not been divinely commissioned (cf. Deut 18:20), with the result that the people had been led to trust in a lie. As with Hananiah, Shemaiah and his descendants are prohibited from witnessing the good that YHWH will do for the people.

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Book Reviews

A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John. By Edmondo F. Lupieri. Translated by Maria Poggi Johnson and Adam Kamesar. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006. xxx and 395 pages. Paper. $36.00.

Edmondo Lupieri reads the Apocalypse as a polemic between Jewish groups, especially in light of Qumran. His commentary is divided into three sections: an introduction, translation with Greek text, and verse-by-verse commentary.

The introduction gives an overview of the history of interpretation and discusses Jewish Apocalyptic with emphasis on inter-Jewish conflict. The translation helpfully juxtaposes the Greek text and English translation. It offers fresh choices such as "marsh of fire" rather than "lake." It consistently renders Greek roots to help readers detect repetition (e.g., prostitution and prostitute).

The commentary addresses each verse without introductory sections and consistently draws parallels with Enochic and Qumranic literature. He finds the sectarian quality more suited for Qumran than Asia Minor. The radical separation from other Jews evident in Qumran's sectarian documents leads him to find polemic against non-Christian Jews in almost every verse of the Apocalypse, even though such conflict is clear in only two of seven cities listed in chapters 2–3.

Greco-Roman literature is neglected and scholarship that connects the Apocalypse to the Roman Empire is minimized. Lupieri rejects that Rome is the whore pictured in chapters 17–19, arguing that she is Jerusalem/Judaism corrupted by Satan. This seems absurd given that in first-century Asia Minor, with its Imperial cults Rome was the city that ruled over the kings of the world (17:18).

In summary, the fresh translation is useful, and reading the Apocalypse as an inter-Jewish polemic is an old thesis now replayed in light of Qumran's sectarian documents. The value of this book by scholars is weakened by the lack of footnotes and substantial arguments for its position. Its use by pastors and lay people will be limited because this reading contains little application for a non-sectarian age.

Peter Perry
Chicago, Illinois

The Music of Creation (with CD). By Arthur Peacocke and Ann Pederson. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006. 107 pages. Paper. $20.

This well-conceived project employs music as a metaphor for "God's continuous creative activity and presence." A CD with 22 musical tracks accompanies the short chapters to illustrate the correspondence between aspects of Christian thought and music. The primary focus is on the First Article, relating musical compositions to God's work of creation.

The musical selections range from Haydn's *The Creation* to Ellington's "C Jam Blues" to Gorecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs.* The text explores such topics as the relationship of creation and time, created goodness, and creative process, including tension and resolution. Analogies are drawn between Christian thought and musical themes, such as harmony, polyphony, and dissonance. The Christian life is portrayed as a kind of improvisation, "grace under pressure," like the performance of jazz or blues. The comparisons between jazz and the religious life (for example, the role of collaboration in an ensemble) are particularly insightful. The book concludes by introducing readers to the mysticism of composers such as Gorecki, Part, and Tavener, whose work points to the transcendent dimension.

This book is suggestive of an interplay between theology and music that deserves fuller elaboration. Primarily it demonstrates the usefulness of metaphors from music for theological construction. To this end, the glossary of musical terms is a helpful tool. The book would be employed most effectively by readers who were prepared to play the particular track referenced in the text while reading the respective section of the chapter.

This would be a useful text for a class on religion and the arts in the congregation, college, or seminary classroom. Bringing a musicologist into the discussion would amplify and expand the dialogue. Peacocke and Pederson deserve our thanks for setting the tone.

Craig L. Nessan
Wartburg Theological Seminary

The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius. By Paul Trebilco. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007. xxiv and 850 pages. Paper. $85.00.

Basing his research on the Pauline corpus, Acts, the Johannine Letters, Revelation, and Ignatius' letter to the Ephesians, Trebilco describes the varieties of Ephesian Christianity over the first century of its history. After first describing the context, the history and religious life of Ephesus, Trebilco examines in order Paul in Ephesus (based on 1 and 2 Corinthians) and the picture in Acts 18:18-26 and 19-20.

In much longer sections, Trebilco draws on the Pastoral Epistles, Revelation and the Johannine Letters to describe the life and proclamation of the early Christians in Ephesus. Part three describes the acculturation of the community to its Ephesian environment, its attitude toward wealth and possessions, the development of leadership and authority, and the role of women, its self-designation, and its relationships between traditions and communities.

The final section uses Ignatius' letter to Ephesus to describe the life of the Ephesian church just prior to 111 C. E.: leadership, bishops and resistance to their authority, the docetic "opponents," and social issues. Some conclusions: There were both Pauline and Johannine communities in Ephesus; they never united in a single community. At the same time, however, he criticizes Walter Bauer's interpretation of the Apocalypse as having lost all memory of Paul's work in the city. In addition, he claims, Bauer allowed only one community at a time in Ephesus, a "takeover" theory. John, however, did not displace Paul. Rather Trebilco tresses the presence of diverse communities in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius. These communities were aware of each other and did not refuse contact. But one should not call this unity, but at most some commonality.

Originally published by Mohr-Siebeck, Tübingen, in 2004, it was priced out of reach of all but research libraries. We owe Eerdmans thanks for making this slightly revised and expanded edition available at a price one can afford. It should be read by all interested in the history of early Christianity in Asia, the Roman province of western Turkey.

Edgar Krentz

Fortress Introduction to Salvation and the Cross. By David A. Brondos. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008. xiv and 220 pages. Paper. $20.00.

This book is a fine contribution to current discussions in soteriology, the inquiry into the nature of Christ's saving work. Brondos, Professor of Theology at the Theological Community of Mexico, systematically examines scriptural, patristic, medieval, reformation, modern, and postmodern theologies of the atonement. Specifically, he vividly details atonement perspectives in Isaiah, Luke, Paul, Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, Anselm, Luther, Calvin, Albrecht Ritschl, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Jon Sobrino, and Rosemary Radford Ruether.

For the most part, Brondos keeps an even-handed, balanced tone as he examines each thinker, though his interpretation of Paul, influenced by the "new perspective on Paul," sees Jesus' death not as salvific in itself but as Jesus' loyalty to God's will for a new community embracing both Jews and Gentiles. Those who think that Paul's primary message was that Christ became sin for us will have misgivings with Brondos' interpretation of Paul. In spite of that, it should be noted that his overviews of the various theologians are quite helpful and accurate.

With respect to Isaiah, Brondos claims that God not only corrects the erring Israelites through discipline but empowers them by "giving them his Spirit so as to transform them internally." Similar to his view of Paul, Bron-

dos sees the Lukan conviction of redemption through Jesus' blood (Acts 20:28) as referring not simply to Jesus' death, but to his "having been killed for his prophetic activity." Brondos makes it clear that Jesus, for Paul, is not a "substitute," dying in the place of sinners, but dying as identifying with sinners, ultimately so that others "may be incorporated into the community of faith."

Brondos' interpretations of the church fathers Irenaeus and Gregory of Nyssa insightfully show how these theologians reinterpreted the biblical heritage in light of the Platonic affirmation that more reality is to be found in the universal (Jesus as the *true form* of humanity) than in the particular. And the medieval theologian, Anselm, as one would anticipate, is criticized not only for his affirmation of a "legal satisfaction" but also for a "retributative view of justice." Brondos' interpretations of the Reformers' (Luther's and Calvin's) views of the atonement are clear and helpful.

One might be surprised that Brondos would choose Albrecht Ritschl over Friedrich Schleiermacher as representative of modern theology, but Ritschl's work integrates aspects of Schleiermacher's "feeling of absolute dependence," as well as the neo-Kantian heritage of an ethical framework of the "kingdom of God" as honoring people as "ends-in-themselves." Barthians will find Brondos' critique of Barth's view of the atonement as a pre-arranged divine choice within the triune life, stilted and unresponsive to concrete history, but Brondos makes a good case for the unhistorical, esoteric, and abstract direction of Barth's atonement theory. Similarly, the individualism inherent in Bultmann's view of salvation is counterbalanced with the concern for the poor in Sobrino and with Reuther's critique of the inferior status often given to women.

Overall, this book makes good on what it intends to deliver: a helpful introductory commentary on the atonement for theological students, pastors, and informed laity.

Mark C. Mattes
Grand View College

Briefly Noted

Psalms. By Geoffrey W. Grogan (Eerdmans, $25). This commentary is part of The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary series that puts emphasis on theological exegesis and theological reflection. Grogan's comments on individual psalms are relatively brief, about one page per psalm, but he concludes the book with two hundred pages of theological reflections (the Psalter's Key Theological Themes, its contribution to biblical theology, and its relevance to present-day theological issues). The approach is conservative, but well-informed. An appendix gives instructions on how to preach on a psalm.

Ralph W. Klein

Dinah's Lament. The Biblical Legacy of Sexual Violence in Christian Interpretation. By Joy A. Schroeder. (Fortress, $35; online $28). This book studies the way that Christians between 150 and 1600 C. E. have interpreted biblical and other narratives about sexual violence. These narratives include Dinah (Genesis 34), a number of virgin martyr legends, the Levite's concubine (Judges 19), David's daughter Tamar (2 Samuel 13); Potiphar's wife and Susanna (Genesis 39 and Daniel 13), plus pictures of sexual violence in Medieval Christian art (picture Bible often made clear that rape is a savage act). Schroeder's story is not a pretty one. Too many of our ancestors blamed the victim or found the cause for the violence in divine justice for some sin of the victim or her father. When Tamar tried to prevent Amnon from raping her, her speech disturbed some interpreters who used her words to convict her. There were also women and men who broke away from traditional interpretations and entered into texts of terror with sympathy and insight. Interpretations of the biblical stories, however, are often more troubling than the stories themselves. Schroeder hopes that her work will help free us all from interpretive blind spots and give us new sensitivity about sexual violence today.

Ralph W. Klein

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We come to Lent, the season of ashes, fasting, prayer, and works of love. For many, Lenten preaching is about confronting sin and repenting or responding to God's grace. "What about preaching sin," younger preachers regularly ask me. They remind me that "the proclamation of God's message to us is both Law and Gospel.…Through the Word in these forms, as through the sacraments, God gives faith, forgiveness of sins, and new life."[1] Their unspoken concern is that I am soft on sin, that grace is getting cheap, and that we need to say more about discipleship. My concern is that I hear lots of scolding and shaming, conditional grace, and a brand of discipleship that comes with a hidden ultimatum—do this or else.

Apart from making the preacher feel all smug and self-righteous, I don't think that it works to *convince* people that they are sinful, or that they *ought* to feel sinful. That approach may get people to agree with the preacher, but it will not lead them to grapple with sin. Moreover, I question whether guilt is consistent with Jesus' own preaching. Law and Gospel implies much more than the simple movement from making people feel guilty to relieving them of their guilt. Guilt in preaching presumes a Christian culture. Guilt heaped on by the preacher often leads hearers who are not grappling with sin to put up their defenses and tune the preacher out.

Law is about God's purpose for and relationship with a humanity created in God's image and how we fail to live that purpose and relationship. So, rather than explanation and accusation, Walter Brueggemann argues that lamentation is a better way to name sin. By lamentation, Brueggemann means that preachers "state what is happening by way of loss in vivid images so that the loss may be named by its right names and so that it can be publicly faced in the depth of its negativity."[2] Brueggemann directs preachers to address the loss to God, who is implicated in it. Preachers should dare to give voice to the pain, loss, grief, shame, indignation, bewilderment, and rage that the congregation is feeling, and employ extreme images in order to cut through denial and self-deception. When this happens, preaching holds up a mirror in such a way that people say: "Yes, that's me! That's us! That's the church. That's the world!" Through this kind of preaching about sin, the Spirit leads people to claim the psalmist's prayer as their own.

> "Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my

1. *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1997), 5.

2. Walter Bueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 16.

> strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many—terror all around! —as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life" (Psalm 31:9-13).

People who get sin, who claim the psalmist's words as their own, who look into the mirror the preacher holds up and see their need of God, don't need convincing. They do not need anyone to make them feel guilty. And people who don't get sin, who have never voiced the psalmist's cry, cannot be convinced of or guilted into their sinfulness.

As for responding to the gospel, for repentance to happen we need gospel to respond to in every sermon. It's insufficient to tell us that we should or must respond. Exhortation flows from the proclamation of the gospel. Preaching attempts to open people to God before it attempts to get people to do anything else. "In some theological traditions, openness is regarded as the one thing human beings have to offer God; in others, God supplies even this. …To preach Jesus Christ is to allow God's word to work through one's personality and expressiveness in such a way that both preacher and congregation are opened." [3] The Small Catechism instructs us that even our openness to God is God's doing:

> "I believe that by my own understanding or stength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."[4]

So, we might think of preaching about sin as lamenting people's realities in ways that they would lament their realities themselves. The harder task is then proclaiming the gospel so vividly and powerfully that people experience God's grace. Harder still is trusting God, rather than ourselves, to bring about repentance and a response. Perhaps this trust in ourselves is what we preachers might give up this Lent.

Seth Moland-Kovash helps us lament our need of God and boldly proclaim the gospel as we make our way through Lent. Seth is a 2001 Master of Divinity graduate from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and is currently enrolled in the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching Program. He serves as the co-pastor of All Saints Lutheran Church, along with his wife Jennifer Moland-Kovash (M.Div. 2004). Seth and Jennifer are the proud parents of Carl Philip, who was born in 2005.

Blessed Lent!

Craig A. Satterlee, editor, Preaching Helps
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3. Jana Childers, "Seeing Jesus: Preaching As Incarnational Act," Jana Childers (ed.), *Purposes of Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 1.

4. Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism (Meaning of Third Article).*

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 7, 2010

Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13)
Psalm 138
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Luke 5:1-11

First Reading

In the reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks clearly and forcefully about Christian tradition. He places himself and his audience in the great stream of Christian tradition. "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received…" (v. 3) and "so we proclaim and so you have come to believe" (v. 11). Paul does not claim to be the originator of any novel theological concepts: far from it, he places himself inside the tradition. I received it, he appeared to me. What is important to Paul at this point is that he is proclaiming something universal, something traditional.

And what is it this tradition that Paul is so concerned to pass on? He obviously thinks that it is critically important: in fact, he calls this information and this tradition "of first importance." It is the summary of the Christ event, the central gospel: "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared…" (vv. 3-5). The first importance news that Paul received and Paul handed on to the Corinthians is the central gospel of Jesus Christ: that he died for our sins, that he was buried, that he was raised, and that he was seen by many people. Paul is reassuring his audience of the veracity of their faith-claims: you can know that it's true that your sins are forgiven because of these events.

Central to the Christian claim is that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Paul, in reassuring his audience of the truth of the traditional faith-claims, wants to be sure that there is a basis for the resurrection claim. Paul lists those who saw Jesus after his resurrection. Paul is again making it clear that testimony about the resurrection stands firmly in a tradition, in a cloud of witnesses. After the resurrection, Cephas saw Jesus, the twelve saw him, more than five hundred brothers and sisters saw him, James saw him, all the apostles saw him, and finally Paul himself saw him. The proclamation stands in a tradition and is backed up by the eyewitness testimony of many. Novelty is not valued, but standing firm in what has been passed down.

This understanding of his own proclamation and of his own message as standing in a tradition established by others is also related to the humility that Paul demonstrates in verses 9 and 10. It could be argued that Paul is overstating the case, and engaging in some false humility. But on the face of it, what Paul is saying is that he is wholly dependent on God's grace for his proclamation and for the ability to proclaim it at all.

Pastoral Reflection

Paul was standing in a tradition as he taught and proclaimed Christ crucified. Jesus invited Simon and the others to join him in that tradition and in the proclamation of the kingdom of God. Jesus invited Simon to join him and promised him that "from now on you will be catching people." With that promise comes the promise that Peter will be given the words. Peter will be given everything that he needs to fulfill the mission set before him.

Jesus also says to Peter words that are central to the Christian faith: "Do not be afraid." Implicit in Paul's message to the Corinthians is a message to not be afraid. Jesus truly did rise from the dead: do not be afraid. Lots of people saw him

alive and passed their witness on to us: do not be afraid. I am passing on to you the tradition just as I received it: do not be afraid.

Perhaps this would be a good time to preach liturgically, and connect this Second Reading to worship practices especially related to Holy Communion. Several versions of the Eucharistic Prayer allow for the congregation to make the basic Christian confession of faith that Paul references here. Often the words are "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." Especially if your congregation regularly uses these words, make the connection to the Second Reading. This is the message that Paul claims is "of first importance." No matter what else we may disagree about in the church, no matter what practices and words change over time and from place to place, the central message of the tradition holds firm: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." Thanks be to God! SMM-K

Transfiguration of Our Lord
February 14, 2010

Exodus 34:29-35
Psalm 99
2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2
Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)

First Reading

Moses and Jesus are clearly linked through today's readings by their propensity to visit mountains, the clear revelations they bring of God's presence and teaching, and by the changed appearances that they each experienced. In the reading from 2 Corinthians, Paul contrasts the two. He compares and contrasts the two situations that we read in the other two lessons and shows how the transfiguration of Jesus is still alive for Christians.

When Moses came down the mountain after his personal encounter with God, his face was shining. The Hebrew word used here could more literally be translated "was sending out rays." We can easily see the connection with the story of Jesus' transfiguration. It is interesting to note that this word could easily be alternately rendered "grew horns" and for this reason Moses has often been pictured artistically as having horns. But most important for our purposes is that Moses came down from the mountain after encountering God. He had a new teaching from God and his appearance was obviously changed through the encounter.

Skipping to the Gospel reading, Jesus too ascends a mountain to encounter God. He does not come with a new teaching as Moses did. It seems that the experience itself is the teaching. Because Jesus did not ascend the mountain alone, as Moses did. He brought witnesses: Peter and James and John. Those witnesses saw him transformed. Those witnesses saw him in the presence of Moses and Elijah, the great heroes of Israel's past, the embodiment(s) of the Torah and the Prophets. Those witnesses heard a voice from a cloud: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

As we compare and contrast the two, perhaps it would be safe to say that witnessing Christ is the teaching. Peter and James and John did not need any more lessons: they did not need another set of Commandments. The ones that Moses received on his mountaintop experience remained sufficient for them, as they remain sufficient for us. But in the experience they learned. They learned who this One is, as they prepared to follow him into Jerusalem. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians "[t]herefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart" (4:1). Peter and James and John were able to experience this amazing thing by God's mercy. Perhaps the experience was

intended to help them not to lose heart in the days and weeks to come in the journey to and through Jerusalem. For those of us who know how that story played out, we know that they did in fact lose heart. But we also know that God's mercy continued (and continues) to be with them and with us.

Pastoral Reflection

Peter and James and John were about to turn their faces toward Jerusalem with their friend and master, Jesus. They had just heard him tell them and the other disciples that he was going to be arrested and killed, and that after three days he would rise again. We are about to enter the season of Lent, moving forward in a different way on that journey toward Jerusalem. We too will experience our Lord's arrest, trial, death and resurrection. We too need a "shot in the arm" experience for our faith to help us to carry through. That is, in part, what this transfiguration experience is all about.

While we are given this reminder of who Jesus is and of who, by extension, we are, this transfiguration experience is about more than that. It is also a commentary for us on "spiritual high" experiences. When "spiritual highs" happen to us, we don't understand them and we find ourselves without words and thoughts as to how to respond. We may babble like Peter: "Let's build something here." We may try to make the moment last longer than God intends. We want to stay on the mountain. We want to stay in the worship space, stay on the retreat; we want to cling to the prayer group longer than it is intended to last.

But then there's all the things happening "down the mountain." Down the mountain people are waiting for healing. Down the mountain people are waiting for a word of hope. Down the mountain people are waiting to hear about our experience on the mountain so that they can be filled as well. For this reason, I intend to read the "optional" extension of the appointed Gospel. We all need to be reminded that the substance of ministry, and the substance of the Christian life happen down the mountain. The mountain-top experiences are there, but they will not last. What lasts and what lingers is healing and serving, living faithfully as children of God amid the cares of this world.

The promise of God is that the transfiguration happens. The mountain-top experiences happen for us. They happen so that we can be empowered and our faith can be fed. SMM-K

Ash Wednesday
February 17, 2010

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 51:1-17
2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

First Reading

Lament is called for on this day. There are some interesting contrasts and balances being addressed between the communal and the individual. The reading from Joel is a call for the whole community to gather together, to lament together, and to plead to God for mercy together. The trumpet is to sound to gather everyone together, from the aged to the children, bridegrooms and brides. In the midst of this communal lament is a reminder of personal "buy-in": "rend your hearts and not your clothing" in verse 13 reminds us of what is really at stake. We are not to gather with the community to lament because the community is gathering, but because we repent. In the midst of the call to real and personal repentance in the midst of the community is the statement of faith and reminder of God's promised mercy: "Return to the Lord, your God,

for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing" (v. 13).

Even for congregations where the appointed psalm for the day is not often read, Ash Wednesday is a day when we generally encounter Psalm 51. It may be read or chanted or sung in any number of musical settings. This psalm is a psalm of personal lament and is written in a very personal tone: "Create in *me* a clean heart, O God" and "Wash *me* through and through from *my* wickedness, and cleanse *me* from *my* sin. For *I* know *my* offenses, and *my* sin is ever before *me*" are just a few examples of the prevalence of the personal pronoun in this psalm. Because of its historical and current use in corporate worship, however, this individual message becomes a communal one. We say the words "create in me" and in some way we are also praying that God would create clean hearts in all of us. We are praying together with our sisters and brothers. In addition, the closing verses of the psalm remind us that the practice of repentance is nothing without the fact of repentance: "The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a troubled and broken heart, O God, you will not despise" (v. 17).

The reading from 2 Corinthians does not play much with individual and corporate repentance, nor with how that repentance happens. Rather this is the promise of God's faithfulness throughout: "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (6:2). God's promised future comes through clearly and is brought to today, even in the midst of a recital of beatings and afflictions and hardships and calamities.

During the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus provides some instruction about spiritual practices. His concern at this point is related both to the communal versus individual aspect as well as the issue of motivation. Our motivation ought to be true repentance and a true desire for faith practices, and not to impress others.

Pastoral Reflection

Especially as we begin Lent and perhaps use the liturgical formulation to invite the congregation to the traditional disciplines of Lent, it may be helpful to point out something about the Gospel reading, which may seem obvious but escapes us sometimes. Jesus does not condemn spiritual practices or disciplines as such. In fact, he assumes that we'll be engaging in them. It's "*whenever* you give alms" and "*whenever* you pray" and "*whenever* you fast." Jesus assumes that we will be giving alms, praying, and fasting. Now the question just remains about how we should do these things.

Especially with regard to the above reflections on the relationship between communal and individual faith practices, I know that people in the congregation I serve would ask questions about bearing witness. "Shouldn't we practice our faith in ways that would draw people to ask questions and allow us to share our faith?"

While there may be some merit in this way of seeing things in general, from the perspective of Jesus' instructions in Matthew's Gospel, that's not the question being addressed. It's almost irrelevant. Our concern ought to be our own right relationship with God and neighbor. Our concern ought to be with practicing our faith in ways that do not threaten to be overwhelmed by the powerful forces of personal pride and/or jealousy. We can then allow God to provide the opportunities for others to see and for us to share our faith. Especially on Ash Wednesday, our concern ought to be on our own motivations and our own thoughts and prayers as we enter the Lenten journey once again. SMM-K

First Sunday in Lent
February 21, 2010

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

First Reading

We begin the season of Lent with Jesus' temptation. In the same way, Jesus' ministry was begun (immediately following his baptism) by the temptation. Before Jesus goes off into the cities and villages and the countryside to announce the coming of the kingdom of God, he faces off against the devil. Before he announced the kingdom of God, he defeats the power of the devil. Still dripping wet from the waters of baptism, Jesus is driven by the Spirit not to comfort and peace but into the wilderness. In the wilderness Jesus meets the devil and faces temptation.

There are myriad ways to classify the three temptations and to draw parallels with the kinds of temptations that we face today. I offer one possible way of thinking about them: First, the devil tempts Jesus with relevance: meet the needs that you have. Serve yourself. Serve the immediate needs. Turn the stone to bread. Jesus replies that the immediately perceived need is not always what life is about.

Second, the devil tempts Jesus with success: I can give you the glory and the authority of all the kingdoms of the world. All you need to do is worship me instead of God. Jesus responds that there are things that are much more important in life than glory, authority, and success.

Finally, the devil tempts Jesus to do something spectacular, something that would draw attention and would make him popular. "Get yourself on the evening news. Any press is good press."

Notice the words that the devil uses to introduce each of the temptations. The first and third (bread and jumping) are introduced with the words "If you are the Son of God…" and the second features the words "If you, then, will worship me…" Put another way, the devil tempts Jesus to doubt who he is and to whom we belongs.

"If you are the Son of God…" Using the very words that were spoken from heaven at his baptism just a few verses earlier, the devil tries to put questions into Jesus' mind about who he is. Are you really the Son of God? Because if you were, you could do these things. You would do these things.

"If you, then, will worship me…" While trying to question Jesus' self-identity, the devil also tries to question to whom Jesus belongs. Because we are God's children, we worship God. If the devil is able to get Jesus to question that relationship, then the worship will follow.

Pastoral Reflection

The devil attempted to get Jesus to question his identity and the identity of the one to whom he belonged. He tried to get Jesus to question the words that were just spoken at his baptism. In fact, what is really happening here is that the devil is trying to get Jesus to question the fundamental meaning of his baptism. Did you really hear that voice from heaven? Are you really the Son of God? What does it mean to be the Son of God?

Jesus was still dripping wet from his baptism when he experienced these temptations. The voice from heaven would still have been ringing in his ears. He perhaps could still feel the spot where the Holy Spirit had landed on him as a dove. He remembered it clearly. That is not the case for most of us. I do not remember the words of the pastor as I was baptized. I do not remember whether the heavens were open and whether a bird came down. But I know that it happened. I know that I am a child of God…that is, until I forget.

Bracketing aside for the moment questions of the existence of the devil and the personification of evil in our world, I think there is something to be learned for us about how the devil (and temptations) work in our world. When we experience temptation, isn't it primarily about our baptism? When we are tempted in any arena, we are being tempted to question our baptism. Are you really God's beloved daughter or son? Have you really been given the power of the Holy Spirit? Are you really the sister or brother in Christ of *him?* Temptations are fundamentally about our baptism and what it means.

One final note, and this may be the most important: Jesus did not go through these temptations to show us how to resist temptation. Jesus did not resist temptation so that we could "imitate Christ" and resist temptation as well. Jesus defeated the devil precisely because we will not. We will not resist temptation. We will not remember our baptism. And yet we are saved from the power of evil. Because Jesus already resisted temptation and because Jesus already remembered his own baptism. Also, God remembers our baptism whether we remember it or not. SMM-K

Second Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2010

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:31-35 *or Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)*

First Reading

The future is a theme consistent through all three readings. And not just the future, we hear of a hopeful future in a time when things may look bleak. In the reading from Genesis we hear of God making the covenant with Abram. But much better put, God CUTS a covenant with Abram. God enacts with Abram what was a traditional way of two kings or leaders making a covenant with one another. And by walking between the halves of the cut animals, God (represented again by the smoking fire pot and flaming torch) is saying "If I break this covenant, may I be cut in two like these animals." Those are strong and powerful words of assurance that the promise of descendants will come true. And notice one other thing: God does not require Abram to walk through the pieces of animal. Abram does not make a promise to God. This is one-sided: God makes the promise and takes the oath to Abram. So the promised future is not dependent on Abram's faithfulness, but only on God's.

Paul is writing to the Philippians from prison, and yet he writes of hope and promise. He writes to encourage his readers, not to reassure himself. He writes to encourage those who might doubt their faith and the path they have chosen because of Paul's imprisonment. They might be doubting the protection and life-giving power of God. And so Paul writes words of promise. "He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory" (v. 21). These words speak to the priorities we make of earthly things instead of heavenly things. But the promise is also much more basic. This body of humiliation, this body lying in prison, will be set free and made glorious.

As Luke's Gospel moves along through the thirteenth chapter, the pressure on Jesus increases and the knowledge of the horrible events to come becomes more clear. In this passage, some Pharisees try to warn Jesus off of Jerusalem because of Herod's intent. This prompts Jesus to lament over Jerusalem in the most tender of terms. But in the midst of that lament and his understanding of Jerusalem's pending rejection, Jesus promises a faithful future. Verse 35: "You will not see me until the

time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" There will be a time when Jerusalem sees Christ for who he is. There will be a time of faithful confession and proclamation, and of seeing Jesus again.

Pastoral Reflection

Where is the situation in which your congregation needs to hear a promise of a faithful future? Where are the situations where the individual members of your congregation need to hear a promise of God's faithful future? It may be economic. It may be relational, or family-related. The brokenness of life is all around us. We almost do not even have to name it. People come into worship feeling the brokenness and the heaviness of the world.

But perhaps naming some of those situations might be a helpful exercise. Then name the situation faced by the people we encounter in each of the readings from this morning. Abram is childless and about to lose his entire fortune to someone not from his household. He had left home and family and everything he knew to follow this God who seems to have failed. Paul was imprisoned and not sure whether he would ever see earthly freedom again. The people of Philippi were concerned for their brother and mentor Paul. But they also surely found themselves doubting themselves and their own faith: had they chosen the wrong path by following the message of one who now was imprisoned and seemed to have lost? Finally Jesus found himself in danger on all sides, rejected by his own.

After we name our fearful situations and those of the biblical people represented in these readings, THEN we can look at the promised and fulfilled faithful future that God had in store for them. Abram was indeed the father of many nations: and it happened in ways that continued to surprise him. Paul was indeed able to continue to proclaim Christ crucified no matter his circumstances. We don't know much about what eventually happened to the people of Philippi, but we know that their witness is preserved and we read part of it in worship this morning, nearly 2000 years later. As for Jesus, there indeed has come a time when we have seen him again. And there is a time when we say "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." We say it and we sing it whenever we gather for worship: whenever we gather to worship the One who was crucified but who, in God's faithful future, was resurrected as well. SMM-K

Third Sunday in Lent
March 7, 2010

Isaiah 55:1-9
Psalm 63:1-8
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

First Reading

We find in all of the readings for today God's abundant forgiveness. Specifically the readings speak of God's patience and willingness to always give second chances. And third chances. And…

In the familiar reading from Isaiah 55, we hear Isaiah's call to plenty in God's abundant kingdom. We hear the call to rethink what it is that we seek, to ensure that we labor for things that satisfy. And at least in emphasis we often stop there. But the passage continues with words of promise and patience from a God of grace in verse 7: "Let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

In 1 Corinthians, Paul uses the bad things that happened to his ancestors when they were in the wilderness with Moses. This text, along with the Gospel reading, raise serious questions of theodicy that might well be worth dealing with. How do we understand the suffering of the

people in the wilderness? Was it because of their sin? While these questions are important, they do not seem to be Paul's primary concern. Paul is not concerned so much with the people in the wilderness as he is with his hearers: what lesson can they take from history? Paul even goes so far as to posit a causal relationship in verse 6: "these things occurred as examples for us…" For Paul, it is clear that God does not want these things to happen to us. God wants us to live. God wants to provide us with examples and warnings that would allow us to choose life.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus provides some corrective to the kind of answers to theodicy questions that could be prompted by reading 1 Corinthians. Did this Galilean sin more than anyone else? NO. Were the eighteen killed by the falling of the tower of Siloam worse offenders? NO. But the call to repentance still remains. And with the parable about the fig tree, there is a promise that God is patient and forgiving. God allows second chances.

Pastoral Reflection

Jesus' teaching here is ripped from the headlines. He is taking current events and providing theological reflections on their meaning for his hearers. Perhaps we as preachers could do the same. In every congregation and in every community there are events and tragedies that make people question the place of God in those events. There are things that make people ask hard questions about "Why?" and "Why those people?"

These readings, especially the Gospel reading, provide a very clear opportunity to give voice to those questions and to provide some helpful guidance. Though Jesus does not provide definitive answers in the terms that we might want or expect, he is very clear about one set of answers that are unacceptable. To decide that these things happened because those people deserved it is completely out of line. We may not have the right answer, but we know which answer is wrong.

And while the parable about the fig tree may have many possible understandings or explanations, one message comes through clearly. God is patient. And God calls us to patience as well.

When I was serving my internship I taught the seventh grade Confirmation class. The students gave me a work-out one evening with questions about suffering all related to God's promise to always love us and to always be with us. The students together came down pretty firmly that God does not protect us. When reporting this conversation the next morning to my supervisor, he said, "Well, I guess it just depends on what time-scale you're thinking about." That's the promise of the fig tree: God has a long time-scale. God has patience. While that's obviously not a helpful message for one in the midst of ACUTE suffering, it can be a helpful way for those of us who are reflecting on questions of suffering before our suffering becomes too acute. SMM-K

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 14, 2010

Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

First Reading

Our Gospel reading is the parable of the prodigal son. Or the parable of the disobedient son, or the wasteful son, or the forgiven son, or the jealous elder son, or the forgiving father, or the prodigal father. From a literary standpoint, there are many points of entry into this parable, and many opportunities to talk about perspective. The meaning and intent of the parable may shift quite dramatically depending on the perspective one brings.

When this parable is read from the perspective of the elder brother, one can hear the message as one of implication as we think about those we would want to exclude from the gift of God's grace. We can hear the judgment in our own voice and then the condemnation of that judgment.

When this parable is read from the perspective of the younger son, it becomes a wonderful message of undeserved grace. It is for this reason that this parable has continued to have such meaning and power in devotional life and in art throughout the centuries. We all can easily place ourselves in the place of the younger brother. We know the reasons for which we should be excluded from the celebration, and we know what it is to feel the unconditional welcome of God.

Read from the perspective of the father, we could ask many questions: would you respond in the same way? What kind of message does this extravagant (prodigal) response send to your servants? To your children? To your business colleagues? This narrative reading from perspective can help us to see with fresh eyes the shocking and counter-cultural nature of God's grace.

One final note: we can glean a clue as to the possible intended reading perspective from the verses left out of the lectionary. Verses 4-11a are two short parables, parables we would call the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. These are two parables all about how much joy God has over the return of one person who was lost. So, in the whole perspective of Luke 15, this parable is about the father's joy at the son's return, about God's joy at our return. So it's really all about God: but then, we knew that didn't we?

Pastoral Reflection

If this parable isn't first and foremost about us and all of our issues about whether we are welcomed and loved by God and whether God should be allowed to welcome and love those "other" people like our wasteful younger brothers, then what is it about? It's first and foremost about God. It's a descriptor of God and God's way of relating to people. It's about a God who would throw a huge party and forget about all expense in order to celebrate with one who was dead and has come to life.

We who are in the church are perhaps to be found in verse 24. "'For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate." We're the "they." We are called to join with God in celebrating the repentance of one sinner, the return of one lost member, the new joy that others have in discovering life in Christian community. We are the "they" who join with God in the dance of celebration.

Especially given the reminder that this brother "was dead and has come to life" this may be a good time to foreshadow Easter. Without jumping the gun and skipping over Holy Week, we all know that Easter is coming. We all know that we are followers of one who quite literally was dead and is alive again. And we have been invited (instructed?) by the Master of the house to celebrate. SMM-K

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 21, 2010

Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

First Reading

This was some valuable perfume. Three hundred denarii is a lot of money. A denarius was a day's wage for a laborer. So a little math: using $7.25 (the federal minimum wage) times 8 hours of work

in a day equals $58. Multiply that times 300 and you get $17,400. I find this kind of calculation and translation helpful in understanding exactly what it was that Judas was so upset about. Of course, John provides us with the editorial comment that Judas was not really concerned about the poor but about his own theft of the funds. Wherever we would rate John's commentary from the standpoint of historical accuracy (and with proper acknowledgement and understanding of the at least possible anti-Judaic undertones to the comment), we're talking about a lot of money. We could raise legitimate questions about its proper use.

Jesus does not directly answer Judas' question or charge, but he does provide a different perspective on the proper use of the money and of the valuable perfume. Jesus defends Mary's use of the costly perfume, which she bought "so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." There is a rhetorical connection being made within the whole scope of John's Gospel with the fact that Jesus' death and burial is coming soon. We've been leading up to this point. Immediately after this story, we find the story that we will hear and often re-enact next week: the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We all know that that triumphal entry will quickly turn into a mob scene as Jesus is crucified. So Jesus' burial is imminent and, in John's Gospel, we all know that.

There is another rhetorical connection being made as well: with Lazarus. This episode opens with a statement of Lazarus' presence, with a reminder of who Lazarus is and why he could be one of those at the table with Jesus. Not only is Lazarus present, but this is Lazarus' house. This is the home of a dead man. This is the home of a man who had been buried, who had been anointed once already for burial. There is ample preaching material in all of these rhetorical connections within the given lectionary text as well as the surrounding verses and chapters of John's Gospel.

Pastoral Reflection

Stewardship on the Fifth Sunday in Lent? Could be. This might be a good time to reflect together on what is valuable, on what has value for us. You might invite the congregation to imagine together what they would do if $17,400 were just dropped in their laps. What could their family do with an "extra" $17,400? Or as a congregation, what needs are there that could be addressed? What things on the wish list might finally be able to come off the wish list if Mary sold her perfume and gave you the money?

Like Judas and Mary and Jesus, you would have to do some prioritizing. At its heart, stewardship is all about prioritizing. You would have to make some decisions about what is most important, what is "mission-critical." Should we fix the roof or establish a food pantry? Should we hire a staff member to lead a new ministry or provide raises for already over-worked staff? Within that priority list, where would buying a pound of perfume come? How about dumping perfume on our Lord?

Stewardship is sometimes about making decisions that look just stupid from a rational human perspective. Stewardship is about dumping perfume on our Lord instead of doing what any cost-benefit analysis would tell you is a smarter thing to do. That is the kind of stewardship to which we are called. During this Lenten season and throughout our Christian lives, and, at the end of the day, we don't have to imagine what it would be like to have $17,400 or $17,400,000. We've already been given everything we need to do the things to which we are called. SMM-K

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