Proper 13 • John 6:22–35 • August 2, 2009

Literary Context

Today's Gospel is the first of a series of three lessons taken from the so-called “Bread of Life Discourse” of John 6:22–71. Here Jesus engages in an extended dialogue first with the crowd (6:25–59) and then with his disciples (6:60–71). At several points, this dialogue shifts to monologue/short speeches (e.g. 6:35–40). It is in this dialogue that Jesus identifies himself with the first of seven statements in John introduced by ἐγώ εἰμι—"I am the Bread of Life" (6:35, 48—see also 6:51). The end result of this dialogue will be that the crowd and most of Jesus’ disciples desert him because of his hard words, and that even among the twelve who remain one is identified as “a devil.” The difficulty of the way in which this entire episode ends with a mass rejection of Jesus and the challenges this presents for the preacher not to soften Jesus’ words for the sake of hearers today is only slightly mitigated by eliminating vv. 70–71 from the final pericope of this series (as the present lectionary does).

In John’s narrative this dialogue takes place after Jesus has performed two miraculous signs, the feeding of the 5000 (Jn 6:1–15) and walking on water (Jn 6:16–21). In Series B the three readings from John 6 also follow these same two miracles (but as they are recorded in the Gospel of Mark!). For the crowd as characters in the narrative, this dialogue takes place especially in light of Jesus’ multiplying the loaves: Because of that miracle they tried to make Jesus king by force (6:15) and it is the reason for why they are still seeking him when today’s lesson begins.

Details

Verses 22–24. These verses provide the immediate set up for the dialogue/discourse that follows. The same crowd that was fed miraculously comes to realize that Jesus is no longer on that side of the lake, and this even though they saw that he did not depart in the boat with his disciples. Note that even though they do not know how Jesus has disappeared (but the reader/hearer does!), it is evident that something unique has taken place. They go to Capernaum to search for Him.

Verses 25–27. The crowd finds Jesus. (It will be noted later in v. 59 that he is in a synagogue.) Note that Jesus does not answer their “when?” question from v. 25 but instead speaks directly to the reason for why they have been looking for him: it is not because of the miraculous signs that they witnessed—thus perhaps indicating that this crowd’s understanding is inferior even to the “faith because of signs”
found in Jerusalem (2:23)—but because they ate bread and were satisfied. Note again their desire to force Jesus to be king for this same reason. Their understanding is not sufficient: the miraculous signs are meant to point to Jesus as the One who is sent by the Father to do the Father’s will, but this crowd does not believe in Jesus (see 6:36) and only sees him as someone who can feed them with “food that perishes”—even if through miraculous means. In place of this “temporal food” Jesus admonishes the crowd to work for “food that remains for eternal life,” food which “the Son of Man will give” them.

For the Son of Man was sealed by God the Father. God has made Jesus His agent to give this “eternal food.” This took place at Jesus’ baptism (see 1:32-34).

Verses 28-29. Since Jesus has told them to work (ἐργάσθε) for eternal bread, the question of the crowd in v. 28 appears legitimate. Jesus gives a straightforward answer—“This is the work of God, to believe in the One whom he sent.” The genitive “the work of God” (τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ) is best unpacked as “the action that God is expecting from you” (versus “the work God does”) as this fits the context of Jesus admonishing them to work. Note also the present/focus-on-connection subjunctive πιστεύτε—“that you would continue to believe.” Jesus’ response in v. 29 gets to the heart of this discourse. What God seeks from mankind is enduring faith in his Son. This is the proper response to the ministry and proclamation of Jesus, what Paul would call “the obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5). Later in the dialogue Jesus will show that the origin of such faith itself is in divine action (6:37, 44).

Verses 30-33. The crowd’s request for (yet another) sign may seem exasperating—and ultimately it is evidence of unbelief—but it can be explained and so Jesus does give a response. When comparing the miraculous sign Jesus performed the day before with the manna provided in the wilderness, Jesus’ miracle—though wondrous—could arguably pale in comparison. Jesus miraculously fed them one meal with bread from an earthly source; God (through Moses) provided their forefathers with a full day’s sustenance every day for nearly 40 years with bread from heaven. In response Jesus points them to himself—he who comes down from heaven—as the true bread which God is providing. Faith would see in what Jesus has accomplished that there is a divine work greater even than that of the manna provided in wilderness: those who ate the manna still died; through his Son the Father gives eternal life.

Verses 34-35. The crowd’s response to Jesus’ appears sincere. Jesus’ response is thus again straightforward—“I am the Bread of Life! Whoever comes to me will certainly not hunger and whoever believes in me will certainly never thirst.” The nominative pronoun ἐγώ, makes this statement emphatic—“I am the Bread of Life!” At this point in the dialogue the idea of “eating this bread” has not been directly introduced. Instead Jesus speaks here of “coming to me.” Still, with talk of “bread,” “hunger,” and “thirst,” one would naturally think of “eating and drinking.”
At this point in the dialogue the activities of coming, eating, and drinking are metaphorical: one does these things through faith, by believing in Jesus—which, as noted above, is the response that God is expecting from his people.

Note that the pericope ends with Jesus’ statement in v. 35. This is a false place to end the pericope, however, as this statement introduces the first short speech (6:35–40) in this episode. What is more, in the verses that follow Jesus explains that this crowd’s problem is and continues to be unbelief. Perhaps the intention is to close the present lesson on a more “upbeat” note, but the preacher should still interpret v. 35 in light of the larger whole, noting especially the unbelief of the crowd.

**Considerations for Preaching:**

1. The arrangement of John 6:22–71 into three parts might suggest that the preacher present a three week series on this dialogue/discourse.

2. There are several maladies that are suggested by this periscope. One central problem is that of unbelief. This is the problem evidenced in the crowd’s misunderstanding of Jesus’ ministry (and made clear later by Jesus in 6:36). The old stereotype which says of Israel that all they wanted was a “bread king”—though not always applicable—is nevertheless still true of this crowd in John 6. They seek Jesus out because “they ate and were satisfied.” The miraculous signs identify Jesus as the Son of Man sealed and appointed by God to bring eternal life; the crowd does not see or believe this. Various contemporary forms of Christianity that have mass appeal emphasize faith as a means toward temporal life and temporal blessing over and against eternal life. These fall into this same pattern and so amount to other forms of unbelief. Yet another malady is suggested by the fact that God must send his Son to give life to the world in the first place: this fallen world no longer has this immortal divine life but is instead subject to death.

3. It is for the purpose of giving and sustaining eternal life that God sent his Son, here self-identified as “the Bread of Life.” Bread (though not Atkins approved) was the basic source of daily sustenance and life in first century Palestine. It was through miraculous bread that Yahweh fed and sustained his people in the wilderness. And it is now through Jesus that God will supply eternal life both to his people Israel and to the world that lost this life in the fall. John’s Gospel has already shown in 3:14–16 that it is in Jesus’ death on the cross that his life-giving work will reach its climax and fulfillment. This life is now given to those who believe in Jesus Christ.

4. Please beware of the false exegetical move of using John 6:29 to interpret Ephesians 2:10 and so please avoid the antinomian move of dismissing talk of sanctification with the idea that “all God really wants is for us just to believe.” John 6 indeed identifies faith as the proper response to Jesus’ ministry and the means through which God gives eternal life. But in Ephesians 2:10 Paul is assuming such
faith exists when he speaks of the “good works which God prepared for us to do.” Jesus’ exhortation in John 13–16 also shows that the Christian life is evidenced through good works. The exhortations of Jesus and Paul assume saving faith in those addressed.

David I. Lewis

Editor’s Note: the following two homiletical helps are adapted from homiletical helps developed by Joel Okamoto in the July 2003 issue of Concordia Journal.

Proper 14 · John 6:35–51 · August 9, 2009

Notes on the text

1. This passage is an excerpt from Christ’s “Bread of Life” discourse, and forms the middle section of a three-lesson series taken from this same chapter. This pericope’s exchange occurred after Jesus fed the 5,000 (vv. 1–13) and after the people failed to discern the sign that he had given in this miracle (vv. 14–15, 26). Jesus urges these people to work for the food that endures to eternal life (v. 27). The people ask for a sign that they might see and so believe in him. They remind Jesus that their fathers received a sign in the manna they ate in the wilderness (vv. 30–31). In his reply Jesus retains the image of bread and tells them that God gives the true bread from heaven that gives life for the world (vv. 32–33). That bread is himself: he is the bread of life (v. 35). Everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him will have eternal life (v. 40). (For additional comments on the larger context of this reading, please refer to the notes for Proper 13.)

2. Jesus’ claim to be the bread that came down from heaven causes the Jews to begin to murmur (egoguzeugon; v. 41). The subjects have changed from the previous section, or at least have become more specific. Jesus had been talking with “the crowd” (ochlos; e.g., v. 22), but now it is “the Jews” whom the Gospel identifies as grumbling. John’s Gospel sometimes refers to Jesus’ opponents as “the Jews” (e.g., 5:16) but not always (e.g., 8:31). These Jews see plainly that Jesus, the son of Joseph, is identifying himself as the Son of God, and it confuses and offends them. This claim is also the primary reason that Jesus was rejected, opposed, and killed (e.g., 5:17–18; 8:58–59; 11:45–57; and especially 19:7, where the Jews tell Pilate that Jesus must die because “he made himself the Son of God”).

3. Jesus responds by rebuking his hearers (v. 43: “Don’t murmur...”). His claim to be the bread of life conflicts with experience and reason. But this is a
matter of divine initiative and revelation, not of human effort and reason, as is belief in this claim and in the one it is about: "No one is able to come to me except the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him on the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God’ ” (vv. 44–45). Therefore, the hearers’ complaints have no foundation. Moreover, Jesus tells them that he is the one God has sent to make himself known (vv. 45–46). Everyone who is truly godly listens to Jesus; everyone who puts his trust in Jesus will be raised on the Last Day and have eternal life. In this way, Jesus is the bread of life. So Jesus promises that anyone who eats of this bread, that is, anyone who believes in Him, will have eternal life (vv. 47–48).

4. Just as he did earlier, Jesus draws a contrast between kinds of food (vv. 49–51). Here Jesus contrasts the manna given in the wilderness to himself as bread of life. The forefathers ate manna and died, but those who eat the bread from heaven will live forever. This distinction should not be understood as one between the material and the immaterial. Speaking about Jesus as “spiritual food” may leave this impression. The “bread of life” is none other than Jesus, the Word made flesh. At the same time, however, earlier verses (especially vv. 26–29 and 35–40) indicate that the “eating” to which Jesus refers in this situation should be understood as faith in Christ.

Notes for preaching

1. “Is not my word like fire,” declares Yahweh, “and like a hammer that breaks a rock to pieces” (Jer 23:29)? The words of Jesus in the bread of life discourse are certainly like fire or a hammer: they challenge and offend His hearers. Accordingly, it would be appropriate to seek to kill the hearers of the sermon and then to speak directly to them the saving Word of God. But I expect that Christ’s divinity is taken for granted in the circles in which most readers of this journal operate and so would not be the stumbling block that it was for Jesus’ hearers. Furthermore, the decisive moment occurs later in this episode (vv. 60–69), and it would be more fitting to wait until that pericope comes up. That situation is not ideal, but neither is it unworkable.

What, then, might preachers seek to do? I would suggest that they take their lead from this excerpt. Here Jesus explains himself and his mission. In a similar way, a sermon based on this excerpt might seek, first, to explain what Jesus teaches about himself and his mission and then to assure hearers of the truth of Jesus’ words about himself and the salvation he brings.

2. Since the text is an excerpt, it will be necessary to set out its context, even if the sermons on the three connected pericopes are similarly connected as a series. How much discussion of this context is needed will depend in part on the previous and subsequent sermons. In any case, it will be important for this text to speak about Jesus’ claims to be the bread of life from heaven. In particular, the sermon
should draw attention to the basic issue in this discourse, which is life. Jesus had come not merely to provide for this life by satisfying temporal needs (e.g., the food that spoils) but especially to provide for eternal life by giving “the true bread from heaven.” And the sermon should draw attention to the problem that this claim raises for Jesus’ hearers.

Of course, death continues to reign in our time and remains as threatening as ever. Efforts to prolong life and to minimize or isolate ourselves from death and its causes are as prominent as ever. Therefore, even we who say that Jesus is the bread of life may find ourselves “working for the food that spoils” (v. 27).

3. Next, the sermon would observe that Jesus explicitly denies any attempt to make God and his ways conform to human reason. When the people complain about Jesus’ words, he tells them to stop. He also quotes Isaiah 54:13—“They will all be taught by God.” Urge the people to be taught by God, and stress the promises that Jesus himself makes: “Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me” and “He who believes has everlasting life” (vv. 45, 47).

4. Following this line of thought, the sermon might seek to assure hearers of the certainty of Christ’s promises. This could be done by showing that Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God is, on the one hand, basic to John’s witness to Jesus Christ and, on the other hand, the reason (in John’s Gospel) that Jesus was rejected and ultimately killed. Then it should be declared that the resurrection vindicated Jesus’ claims about himself and about salvation through him. In the language of John’s Gospel, the resurrection shows that Jesus “is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). In terms of this pericope, the resurrection vindicates Jesus’ claim to be the bread of life and the living bread that comes down from heaven.

Joel Okamoto

Proper 15 • John 6:51–69 • August 16, 2009

Notes on the text
1. For the context, see Propers 13 and 14.

2. At this point Jesus provokes a fresh concern among the people. We might say that their concern shifts from the person of Jesus to his flesh. When Jesus first declares himself the bread of life that came down from heaven, the people wonder: “Isn’t this Jesus, the son of Joseph, someone we know? How can he say: ‘I came down from heaven’” (v. 42)? When he responds to their grumbling, Jesus claims to be the “living bread that came down from heaven” and asserts that whoever eats this bread will live forever and that this bread is his own flesh (vv. 50–51). The people now seize on and argue about the call to “eat his flesh” (v. 52).

3. Jesus responds to their complaints by affirming (“Truly, truly, I say to you”) that “except you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do
not have life within you” (v. 53). Christ calls his flesh “true food” and his blood
“true drink” (v. 55). Eating this food and drinking this drink will give the hearers
eternal life, assure them of the resurrection from the dead, and unite them with
Christ (vv. 54-56). Jesus further explains that this union with him is like the life he
has with God the Father. Just as Jesus was sent by the Father and has his very life
through the Father, so also everyone who feeds on Jesus will have the same life.

4. What constitutes “eating” and “drinking” in this context? This question is
closely connected to (and therefore should be answered with) the question of
whether Christ’s words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood constitute a
reference to the Lord’s Supper. Of course, different judgments have been made
concerning these matters, but my view may be put this way: Christ’s words do not
constitute a direct or a primary reference to the Lord’s Supper. On the one hand, it
is consistent with the earlier parts of the discourse to understand eating Christ’s
flesh and drinking his blood as metaphors for believing in Him. As Luther said:
“To eat is synonymous here with to believe” (LW 23.135). On the other hand, we
should observe that Christ does not institute the sacrament in this passage as he
does on the night of his betrayal. He also does not speak about the bread and wine
in, with, and under which his body and blood are given to eat and drink in the
sacrament.

Indirectly, however, Christ does speak about eating his flesh and drinking his
blood. Earlier he had referred to himself as the bread of life (“I am the bread of
life”) that is given to eat. Now, however, he expands on this and speaks of eating
his flesh and drinking his blood—speech that, to the readers of the Gospel, obvi­
ously suggests the sacrament. That readers should heed the suggestion is indicated
by the parallel between this passage and John 3 on baptism, especially in 3:5: “Truly,
truly, I say to you, except a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter
into the kingdom of God.”

5. As this pericope proceeds the “Bread of Life” discourse comes to its
climax. Once again, Jesus’ words offend. Earlier the Jews had grumbled when Jesus
told them that he was bread that came down from heaven (vv. 41-42). Then they
argued about Jesus’ giving his flesh to eat (v. 52). Now even many of Jesus’ own
disciples (cf. vv. 16-24) are offended when he insists that eternal life depends upon
eating his flesh and drinking his blood. “This is a hard teaching,” they say. It wasn’t
hard to understand, but it was hard to accept: “Who can accept it?” (v. 60).
Obviously, they could not. In John’s Gospel, “disciples” may refer to followers
other than the Twelve, as it clearly does here. Joseph of Arimathea is identified as a
disciple (19:38), and Jesus refers to the Jews in Jerusalem who have believed him as
disciples (8:31).

6. Jesus does not try to soften this “hard teaching.” As Luther said, “And if
flesh and blood is offended here and murmurs, by all means let it mur­
mur” (LW 33.180). Instead, Jesus challenges the disciples further: “Does
this saying offend you? What if you were to see the Son of Man go up to where he was before” (vv. 61–62)? Earlier Jesus had “offended” by claiming to have come down from heaven. Now he compounds the “offense” by indicating that he will return to the heavens.

7. Then Jesus answers their question. Who can accept his teaching? No one, on their own. On the one hand, Jesus affirms that his words bring the Spirit and bring life: “The Spirit gives life; the flesh avails for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and they are life” (v. 63). On the other hand, without God’s will and work no one will believe these words and so receive life. As Jesus teaches, life is the gift of the Spirit of God, but “the flesh,” that is, the sinful human nature, “counts for nothing” in salvation. Therefore, unless God desires faith for the hearer, there will be unbelief, even in the presence of the truth and with the promise of eternal life. And so, Jesus explains, “Because of this I have told you that no one can come to me except it is given him by the Father” (v. 65; cf. v. 44: “No one is able to come to me except the Father who sent me draws him”).

8. These words of Jesus might be called “the last straw.” “From this time [or “For this reason”—ek toutou] many of his disciples went back and no longer walked with him” (v. 66). Jesus’ words are Spirit and life; nevertheless, they offend and many of his followers no longer follow. Jesus has incited not only his opponents (“the Jews”) but even many of his own disciples.

9. When Jesus sees this, he makes no attempt to keep them with him. Instead, he turns to those who remain, the Twelve, and asks them: “You don’t also want to leave, do you?” (v. 67). Speaking for the Twelve, Peter acknowledges the truth of Jesus’ words and confesses faith in Him: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life, and we have believed and have seen that you are the Holy One of God” (vv. 68–69).

Notes for preaching

1. I would suggest once again that the sermon take its lead from this excerpt (for a reason, see the “Notes for preaching” in the study for Proper 14). Here Jesus explains about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. In a similar way, a sermon based on this excerpt might first seek to explain what Jesus teaches about himself, and then to assure hearers of the truth of Jesus’ words about himself and the salvation he brings.

2. The preacher might begin by observing that the confusion continues. In the previous pericope we find the Jews confused and offended by Jesus’ describing himself as the bread from heaven, because this implied that he was claiming to be the Son of God. But Jesus reiterates his claim and calls on his hearers to eat this bread, that is, appropriate or receive it. But this call, as the opening of this pericope details, further confuses and offends his audience. They ask and argue among themselves: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”
3. Next, the sermon could work through Jesus’ response as an explanation of “giving us his flesh to eat” (see above, #3 and #4 in “Notes on the text”).

4. The sermon could then present Christ’s flesh and blood for people today to eat and to drink for eternal life. As readers and hearers of John’s Gospel, we are in a very different position from that of the people portrayed by the Gospel. Jesus, the bread of life, was right in front of the people. He was there as the bread that came down from heaven to be believed upon. But Jesus has now ascended into heaven and is no longer present in the same way. Nevertheless, he still makes himself present for us as true food and drink: in his body and blood in the Lord’s Supper. We truly have Christ’s flesh to eat and Christ’s blood to drink. Therefore, for us, eating Christ’s flesh and drinking Christ’s blood no longer comprise only an image for being given Christ as our Savior and for our reception of him by faith. Now it is also a means of grace, i.e., in which Christ, the bread of life, is given to and received by us who are perishing that we may live forever.

5. The disciples were right: Jesus’ teaching was hard. And Jesus’ response to their complaint was just as hard. The teaching and the response were truly like a fire and a hammer (Jer 23:29): they offended the hearers. But as hard as they were, his words were Spirit and life. This text lends itself to the doing of the two chief works of God in human creatures: terrifying, and then justifying the terrified, or making them alive (Ap XII.53). It would be appropriate for a sermon on this text to proclaim Jesus and his words about salvation in a way that challenges today’s hearers and then to speak “the words of eternal life,” that is, the promise of Christ that they are his people, the objects of God’s choosing, the recipients of his grace.

6. After an introduction, the sermon might begin by clarifying the question of the disciples: “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” It wasn’t hard to understand Jesus’ teaching. To be sure, the disciples may not have understood it fully, but they understood it well enough. It was a hard teaching to accept. Jesus’ response is “a hard teaching” in the same way. It was hard to accept.

7. Then the sermon could move on to what is easy enough to explain but hard to accept. Jesus is not hard to understand when he says: “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing.” Life and salvation come from the Holy Spirit alone; we can and will do nothing that brings eternal life. Again, Jesus is not hard to understand when he says: “The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and they are life.” Jesus’ message is a Spirit-filled and life-giving Word. Apart from his Word there is no salvation, and apart from believing him and in him there is no salvation. Yet again, Jesus is not hard to understand when he says: “No one can come to me except it is given him by the Father.” Unless God wills one’s salvation, Christ’s Word will not be believed and the Spirit will not give life.

8. The sermon might next show how this teaching is brought out elsewhere in the Scriptures and confessed and taught by the church. For instance, Jesus’ earlier words in verse 44 (“No one is able to come to me except the Father who sent
me draws him”) are an obvious reference, as are Jesus’ words, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit” (15:16), and the Prologue about becoming children of God, born of God (1:12–13). We confess and teach this in the Small Catechism: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel....”

9. The point of the last suggestion is to deny the possibility of explaining away the scandal of Jesus’ words in the text. One might say that we have no words about God and his salvation through Christ and the Spirit that can remove or relativize the force of the teaching that salvation is by grace alone.

10. The issue, then, is clear. There is no question that salvation is by grace alone. That is a hard teaching, but it is true. In view of this, the question is whether God will save us. Will God save us? Will Christ, his Son, raise us on the last day? Will God give us life? The sermon should turn at this point to the word of salvation, either by reminding hearers that they have the word of eternal life already in baptism or by promising them life and salvation in the name of Jesus Christ, the bread of life. Because of this word, we can say with Peter: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life, and we have believed and have seen that you are the Holy One of God.”

This explanation by Luther may be also helpful:

Since God has taken my salvation out of my hands into his, making it depend on his choice and not mine, and has promised to save me, not by my own work or exertion but by his grace and mercy, I am assured and certain both that he is faithful and will not lie to me, and also that he is too great and powerful for any demons or adversities to be able to break him or to snatch me from him. “No one,” he says, “shall snatch them out of my hand, because my Father who has given them to me is greater than all” [John 10:28f.] (LW 33.289).

Joel Okamoto

Proper 16 · Mark 7:1–13 · August 23, 2009

This week and next week (Proper 17) make up a continuous reading of Mark 7. (Technically, Proper 18 brings the reading of Mark 7 to a close, but there is a thematic and geographic shift that separates it from Propers 16 and 17.)

If we were to treat these two readings as two parts of the same whole, we could identify this week’s Gospel as dealing with things external and next week’s
with things *internal*. That is oversimplifying a bit, but it at least begins to paint a picture of Jesus’ harsh sayings in Mark 7.

First, the audience: here, Jesus is speaking directly with “the Pharisees and some of the scribes ... from Jerusalem” (v. 1). They seem to have been lying in wait for him as he got off the boat, upon his return to Galilee (6:53).

Second, the issue at hand: both this week and next, Jesus is dealing with things clean and unclean, and what makes them so, essentially a controversy over cultic purity.

Characteristically, the issue is forced upon him when there seems to be better things for him to do. Mark 6:53 sets this contrast in striking detail: “And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.” Considering this rush of people—and the compassion it inspires in the One from whose very cloak flows healing—makes the Pharisees’ question seem all the more small-minded: “Why do your disciples ... eat with defiled hands?” (v. 5). Matter of fact, considering the amazing healings that culminate this chapter (the Syrophoenician daughter and the man healed by the Savior’s saliva), this two-part interlude is almost an intercalation of sorts. Jesus’ ministry of power and healing to the multitudes is interrupted by the legalistic questioning of a few.

And yet, the question is no small one. What are the hungry to do with their “defiled hands”? Hearkening to Isaiah, Jesus’ answer is tart: the last thing they should do is use them to “hold to human tradition.” It seems a fitting description for hypocrisy anywhere: “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition” (v. 8). The verb *kratéw* here (“hold”) can connote violence: to seize, to master over. The consequences are dire, since it “make[s] void the word of God” (v. 13). Preaching the ways we ourselves, in our own localities today, abandon the powerful, creative, healing word of God for human tradition preaches a convicting word of law to any human heart.

Today’s Gospel reading, though, breaks off at just that point: “And you do many things like this” (v. 13). Our own hands are still defiled by our hypocrisies. And we’re still hungry. The rest of the Gospel story then is the preacher’s to tell: Jesus treats us—his twenty-first century disciples—in the same way he treated his first-century twelve. He still lets us eat and drink, defiled hands and all. But he does not let us (or even himself) off the hook. His own *undefiled* hands will be hooked with nails to a beam of wood to suffer and die at the hands of the powerful few. He will endure a horrible human tradition of condemnation and execution, so that “the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles” (v. 4) will seem like so much small potatoes compared to the washing of rebirth and regeneration that cleanses a defiled heart (more about that heart next week).

Thus, the bread that is his own body and the wine that is his very blood await the eating and drinking of all those who take the now resurrected Christ at Concordia Journal/Summer 2009 303
his powerful, creative, healing, redemptive word: “This body given for you ... This cup shed for you.” Today’s Eucharist celebrates all that Isaiah foresaw in today’s Old Testament reading, a reality that could only be made possible by the raising of God’s own “dead man walking”: “The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel” (Is 29:19).

Travis J. Scholl

Proper 17 • Mark 7:14–23 • August 30, 2009

If last week’s Gospel reading dealt with things external (defiled hands), this week deals with things internal (an unclean heart), part two in Jesus’ teaching on what makes things (and people) clean and unclean.

The audience has changed: “Then he called the crowd again and said to them ...” (v. 14, emphasis mine). Jesus is turning towards those who are closer to his own heart. The stern critique he gave to the religious leaders is now distilled into a simple principle: “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile” (v. 15). Mark calls it, literally, a parable, although it reads more like a proverb.

Perhaps that is part of the disciples’ confusion. When they question him about this whole affair, Jesus has “left the crowd and entered the house” (v. 17). Jesus then gives a basic lesson in gastroenterology: what goes into a person bypasses the heart, into the stomach, flushed out the intestines, into the sewer (v. 19). But then the lesson becomes psychosomatic: what defiles is a matter of the heart, and only the heart is a completely internal organ. “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come ...” (v. 21). The long list that follows holds a mirror up to us all, since it is hard to read it and not feel implicated somewhere along the line. There’s enough evil to go around to every human heart and then some.

Eugene Peterson, in his popular biblical paraphrase The Message, utilizes some keen language to sum up this list: “all these are vomit from your heart. There is the source of your pollution.” Pollution. We tend to think of pollution as something out there, that we breathe in. But, in matters of the heart, pollution is something produced by the internal combustion of evil. Our sin—mine and yours—pollutes the world.

And in this sense, we have a truly “green” Savior. His way of dealing with the pollution of sin and evil is not to cap its emissions, but to cut it off at its source. To paraphrase the psalmist, Jesus is in the business of creating clean hearts (Ps 51:10). Which ultimately is a call to repentance: “Rend your heart and not your clothes,” cries the prophet. “Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and
merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love…” (Joel 2:13). That cleansing work is completed by the work of the cross, of course, the ultimate purging of the world’s pollution. But Jesus’ whole life and ministry—every single day of it—was taken up in binding up dirty and broken hearts. (Look no further than next week’s Gospel for two vivid examples.)

The same goes for every single day of his resurrected life. Every time sins are forgiven, a dirty heart is created clean. And the beautiful thing is this: a clean heart pumps out clean energy. In Galatians 5, Paul’s list of “works of the flesh” echoes Mark’s. But then Paul contrasts it with what comes from a clean heart: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit” (Gal 5:22–25).

A clean heart led by the Spirit: I can’t think of a better energy policy for the people of God in this “green” season of Pentecost.

Travis J. Scholl

Proper 18 • Mark 7: (24–30) 31–37 • September 6, 2009

Literary Context

1. The pericope continues Mark 7. The near goal of the narrative is Mark 8, skipped in this Markan section of the lectionary, but thematically where the story is headed. So who is this Jesus? Is he the Christ/Messiah? Thus these stories are secondarily about faith and primarily about Jesus.

   So the friends of the paralytic (2:4), the woman in 5:34, and the humility of the Syrophoenician woman in 7:29: faith always has an object. It is not as much about faith, but faith in Jesus and with it the recognition of His true identity.

   Thus the healing miracles, as well as the nature miracles, are really about the Creator come as Redeemer (“who is this that wind and wave obey him?” 4:41). Further, these are the activities and “signs” (cf John) that in Jesus the Messiah—and the Messianic Age—has come. Our text is almost a Markan version of Matthew 11:4, fulfilling Isaiah 35:5 (the OT lesson for the Sunday): “he even makes the deaf hear and mute speak!”

2. Jesus’ Galilean ministry includes several forays beyond Israelite territory, most notably the Gerasene demoniac (5:1–20) in the Decapolis region, and here in the encounter with the Syrophoenician woman and with the deaf/mute back in the Decapolis.

   The geographical details especially in 31 have left many commentators confused, as Sidon is hardly on the way from Tyre to Decapolis via the Sea of Galilee.
Matthew includes the reference to Sidon along with Tyre at the beginning of the itinerary (Matthew 15:21). Attempts to explain the route as avoiding the territory of Herod Antipas (in the wake of 6:14ff) are speculative but possible. No reason is given in the text, but Jesus clearly is spending time and attention among the Gentile “nations.” His mission both to “all Israel” and beyond Israel is anticipated in the list of those who came to him already in 3:8.

3. Jesus had appointed twelve apostles as the core of the New Israel (3:13), but immediately the tension within Israel regarding the identity of Jesus is highlighted (3:20ff). Later, immediately following Jesus’ rejection in his hometown (6:1–6), those same Twelve are sent out to preach repentance, drive out demons, and heal the sick, all signs that the Messianic Kingdom has come near, but now in tension with Jewish leadership.

The immediate context in chapter 7 follows another confrontation with Jewish authorities, regarding clean and unclean ritual eating. Jesus’ refutation of the purely mechanical (*ex opere operato*) nature of ritual sets the stage for his own encounter with those outside Israel, who will challenge the rigid avoidance of anything “unclean” (cf. Acts 10:9ff).

4. Within this larger framework, our text in 7:24–36 makes two general statements: (1) As Messiah, Jesus brings into human history the eschatological new age of the new creation, and (2) while centered in Israel, as Jesus is the “Jewish Messiah,” the new creation is indeed for all creation, to the Jew first but also to the Greek (Romans 1:16). Indeed, while the “nations” will come to Zion (Isaiah 2:2–4) at Pentecost, the post-Pentecost mission from Jerusalem into all the world is already anticipated, even if Jesus’ entrance was, at this point, quiet and even private.

**Textual Notes**

7:24 The relatively rare use of Ελκείθεν and δὲ suggests a clear break in the story line: Jesus is headed out of Israelite territory into Phoenicia. However, there is no strong “missionary” theme; Jesus οὐδὲνα ἠθελεν γνῶναι. Yet his presence cannot be hidden (verse 25); the Markan εὐηχεῖ moves the story onward.

7:25 As with the Jewish leader Jairus, the concern is for a little daughter (θυγάτριον, only here and 5:23, where the story of Jairus’ daughter surrounds a story of Jesus’ care for a grown “daughter” [5:34]).

7:27 The diminutive is used also for the little dogs (κυνάριοις), and, if the interpretative explanation is correct about the Jewish tradition of referring to Gentiles as dogs, then the “little dogs” might conflate the concern about both a Gentile and the Gentile woman’s little daughter.

7:28 The woman replies, “κύριε” (the “yes” is likely secondary) which reveals her respect and humility (and the only use of this vocative form in Mark) in affirming Jesus’ metaphor and even extending it to her and her cry for help.
7:29-30 The humble recognition of Jesus’ mission, not just to the lost sheep of Israel (Matthew makes this explicit, Mt. 15:24), gives witness to the fact that demons are subject to Jesus, even in Gentile territory.

7:31 The second pericope continues the theme of Isaiah 35 even more explicitly, as the ears of the deaf are unstopped, and the mute shouts for joy (35:5-6).

7:33 Jesus takes the man aside (ἀπολαβόμενος) and heals by means and by his personal touch, along with the action of prayer and connection with heaven. The little daughter was healed without Jesus even being present with her; here Jesus uses touch and the medium of his spittle. No explanation is given; the focus is on the result and the witness to Jesus.

7:34 הָירָשְׁא (cf. Hebrew דָּשָׁא, with ears, דָּשָׁא) is Aramaic Ithpeel (cf Hithpael); the use of a passive/reflexive impv. is awkward (cf. Psalm 24:7, be lifted up!) and implies an external power by which the action is accomplished “extra nos.”

7:37 The testimony of the people that Jesus has done all things “well” (καλώς) may also hearken to the new creation, as God pronounced the first creation “good” and everything “very good” (Gn 1:31). The fulfillment of Isaiah 35 is made explicit by an almost direct citation in the final statement.

Homiletical Thoughts

With Jesus the Christ, the New Creation has begun. It comes by God’s power and grace, not by our actions, and it can come quite quietly. It is universal, for all creation, first to (and through) the house of Israel but for all, even we, who like the dogs, also receive the children’s bread. At this point, Jesus is not seeking out the Gentiles; but wherever he goes, it is as though the new creation cannot not break in, or break out!

Nevertheless, the story is not over. Full recognition and revelation of the Messianic mission is yet to come—with Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection (8:27ff, 31ff), into which we are baptized and receive the “new Adam” of the new creation; saint yet sinner living in the grace of Christ’s redemption and forgiveness.

Examples of the fallen creation abound, including infirmities and disabilities and general “groaning” (Rom 8:22). Yet the central—and simple—summary of the whole Biblical story is this: creation → fall → new creation, established in Jesus the Christ, accomplished by atonement and resurrection, and consummated at His Second Coming. Understanding Jesus: who is he is as Creator-Redeemer (and not simply as faith-healer!) is crucial. But even more important is receiving Jesus in the humility of faith, saved by grace, and knowing that our greatest healing, already accomplished and present in our lives, comes through the forgiveness of sins and the first-fruits of the new creation, even as we anticipate the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come.

Andrew Bartelt
Sermon Notes

The question that presses the characters in this text is the same one that often presses modern Christian readers of this text. It is the question that the preacher himself must face and answer: *What authority does Jesus really have?* Put more simply: *Can Jesus help us or not?* The question hangs in the air while Jesus and a desperate father discuss the condition of the child writhing in the dirt in front of them (v. 20). “How long has he been like this?” Jesus asks, doctor-like. “From childhood,” the man answers, and after describing the symptoms he pleads: “... *If you can do anything, help us! Have compassion on us*” (vv. 21-22).

The father had his doubts about Jesus. He didn’t know what Jesus could deliver! Jesus’ disciples were powerless (v. 18). The “silent spirit” was the one in control (vv. 17-18). So, in the middle of all the unbelief and strife, Jesus claims authority! He responds to the man’s plea: “*If you can*” (Jesus echoes the man’s utterance to rebuke it, as if to say: ‘Of course I can! Why would you even question that?’)! *Everything is possible to the one who believes* (this could refer both to Jesus and the father)” (v. 23)

Jesus’ utterance is a bold call to trust him and take him at his word. The father’s paradoxical reply reveals his weakness: “*Lord I believe! Help my unbelief*” (v. 24)! In his poignant response, the father was not praying that his faith be helped until it was “strong enough” for Jesus to do something. Rather, he was confessing his weakness and asking that his son would be healed anyway. And Jesus demonstrated that the man’s faith or lack thereof, was no obstacle to him. He commanded the unclean spirit to get out and never come back! And the spirit obeyed (v. 25). (He had no choice.)

So, “*What authority does Jesus really have?*” The father found out that with God all things are possible! And in the NT, this event was not unique. In the NT, Jesus was the “go to guy” for doing the impossible! He was the one in charge. Even Death left a person when Jesus wished it. So, he raised ordinary people like Lazarus from the dead. And he HIMSELF rose! The full significance of the events of the text, especially vv. 26-27, is seen in the light of Christ’s resurrection! There was no “if you are able!” In the NT, Jesus “was able.”

But we are a long way from the NT. Things are different now. Jesus doesn’t walk among us now. So the question presses us: “*Can Jesus help us or not?*” *Does he have any authority at all over what most afflicts me, and will he wield his authority in my favor or not?* The temptation is for us to doubt. We see few dramatic demonstrations of God’s power. (People die like flies and don’t rise!) The cry of the father is personally familiar: “*Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!*” (That is: “Demonstrate your authority! Show us your power!”)
(Here the preacher begins to move to proclamation. His goal is to speak so as to create faith in hearts filled with doubt. A direction to do that follows.)

Well, as the preacher, I need to answer that question—that plea! Remember that I am here on the authority of the resurrected Jesus, the Jesus who now lives and reigns from heaven, in whose name and in whose stead I speak. And so it is his authoritative word I bring when I tell you that he has forgiven your sins! He has the authority to forgive you and he has! You were given that promise in your Baptism, you receive it as from our Lord himself in Holy Communion, and here and now you hear his decision again.

So, your sin cannot separate you from God. Jesus has done away with it. That means that your weakness, your troubles, your sorrows, only have a short season to live. They do not reign. Christ reigns. The Lord and King of all, when he returns, will transform your fleshly bodies into spiritual ones (1 Cor 15). “There will be no more death or sorrow or pain . . .” (Rev 21:4). No other authority in heaven or on earth will stop him. This Jesus is Lord. And he is your Lord, Lord for you. “Nothing will separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:37–39). This is the promise of the one who rose from the dead and who has power over all things. Let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid!

Tim Saleska

Proper 20 • Mark 9:30–37 • September 20, 2009

Literary and Liturgical Setting

Our reading is the second of three passion predictions in Mark. In the literary context of Mark, these three passion predictions are held together. First, they span the period between the Galilean ministry of Jesus (1:14–8:30) and his Passion (11:1–15:47), between the revelation of who Jesus is and what Jesus has come to do. Second, they are framed by the only two healings of the blind in Mark (8:22–26 and 10:46–52), suggestive of the disciples’ blindness in following Jesus. Third, they each display a similar pattern of passion prediction (8:31; 9:30–32; 10:32–34), misunderstanding on the part of the disciples (8:32–33; 9:33–34; 10:35–40), and teaching on the nature of discipleship (8:34–9:1; 9:35–37; 10:41–45).

While Mark has set these passion predictions together, the lectionary has taken them apart. Earlier in Lent, one encounters the first (Lent 2) and the last (Lent 5) of these passion predictions. Now, in the midst of Ordinary time, the lectionary offers the second for our contemplation and spiritual formation. While this prediction has been separated and displaced from the larger patterns established by
the literary context of Mark, the lectionary has retained the smaller pattern in where it has opened and ended the reading. The hearers are offered the passion prediction, the misunderstanding, and the teaching on the nature of discipleship.

One might be tempted to take any one of these units and preach a sermon on it as an isolated theme, yet holding the three together honors the pattern of Mark and also the focus upon discipleship voiced in the introit, the collect, and the verse for this day. Here, in the literary pattern of the text and the liturgical setting, one sees how the strange work of God (his rule in weakness) is the source of our trust (committing our way to him) and the ground of our service (being willing to serve as least and last of all) in the kingdom of God.

Suggested Outline

Revealing a Hidden Hope

Introduction: Earlier in Mark, Jesus had promised his disciples that “nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light” (4:22). This promise, heard in the context of his parables and the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, raised hope on the part of the disciples. They could anticipate a glorious revelation of the Messianic kingdom and were standing in awe as they witnessed Jesus casting out demons (1:21-28), healing the sick (1:29-34), ruling over creation (4:35-41), and even raising the dead (5:21-43).

Now, however, his promise was less obviously associated with hope, for the things that Jesus was revealing to the disciples were things they would rather not see: his death and resurrection (9:31); their quarreling over greatness (9:34); and the servile nature of discipleship (9:35). It is within this difficult and dangerous revelation, however, that Jesus offers the truest hope that anyone could find, for in his death is true life, in littleness is greatness, and in receiving the least is the promise that one receives God himself.

1. Revealing the Will of God: This passion prediction is the shortest of the three that Jesus offers in Mark and yet it contains the widest scope. Whereas, in the other two passion predictions, Jesus names those who kill him with a frightening specificity (“the elders and the chief priests and the scribes” in 8:31 and “the chief priests and the scribes, and . . . the Gentiles” in 10:33), in this passion prediction he uses an even more frightening generality (“be delivered into the hands of men”). Jesus implicates not just the religious leaders or the ruling Gentiles but all humanity in his death.

The ways of God are opposed to the ways of humanity and the gracious work of God is hidden in his violent rejection by all. Our world’s fascination with things spiritual tends to identify love with tolerance and replace forgiveness with acceptance. Our Lord’s revelation, however, reveals the depth of the love of God. Jesus does not tolerate sin nor accept it, rather he dies for it that those who kill may be forgiven, those who persecute may be loved, and those who live with superficial
understandings of faith and discipleship may be awakened to the depths of love and life within God’s kingdom.

2. Revealing the Ways of God: Earlier Jesus discerned the hearts of the religious leaders and sought to teach them the ways of the kingdom (2:1–12); here Jesus perceives the hearts of his disciples and again seeks to teach. While they were silent and unwilling to admit it, the disciples had argued with one another about greatness. Using human standards of greatness, they found that they were being driven apart. Jesus, however, brings them together and uses their sinful conversation as an occasion to teach them about the ways of God.

The human heart has not changed over the centuries and greatness is still often measured in ways that turn people against one another, even in the church. Our Lord, however, uses this occasion to lead us into the ways of God. He reveals that the search for greatness hidden in the human heart will separate us from one another but the gift of greatness coming from the heart of God brings us closer to one another, inspiring humble service that forms community and builds up the fellowship in love.

3. Revealing a Hidden Hope: Later, Jesus will take children into his arms and bless them, encouraging each disciple to receive the kingdom like a child (10:13–16). The popularity of that scene makes it hard to hear what Jesus is doing in this portion of the text. Here, Jesus is not blessing children or holding children up as examples of faith and he is certainly not tapping into contemporary sentimental notions of the innocence and simplicity of childhood. Rather, Jesus is bringing into the midst of a divisive argument something about which everyone could agree—this child is nothing. While they might argue over who is the greatest, they can all agree that a child is the least. Yet, Jesus identifies with this child, this one valued least, holding the child in his arms, and he promises that others will come to receive God when they receive that which is least in his name.

His gestures are puzzling and his words are a mystery until that day when he radically identifies with that which is least in this world, becoming the crucified one, rejected by the world, rejected by religious leaders, rejected by his own heavenly Father, and yet fiercely and faithfully holding on to every last sinner, that his death might be the way that the least of all enter into the kingdom of God. Here, Jesus silences all argument and reveals the radical mercy of God, the hope that lies hidden in his suffering, death, and resurrection and in the suffering service of all who follow in his way.

David Schmitt
“Whose Side, Anyway?”

Charles simply figured there must be something wrong with his baseball glove. That was the fifth pop-fly in a row that fell straight out of the sky, right into the pocket of his mitt, and sprang out almost as high, landing on the green summer turf. It was a tough day to be an outfielder. Things started to look up, though, at the top of the next inning. Charles batted second and struck the ball with moderate force right between the shortstop and second baseman. It was only a single, but to Charles it gave the utmost sense of victory. He got a little lost in that sense of victory.

As he stood firmly planted on that white square bag, he began to daydream himself into the majors. He heard the announcer almost as clearly as reality, “That was some hit hammered into centerfield by Charles P. Smitzhoff. He’s new to the majors, but he is going to go far!” Unfortunately, getting lost in a daydream while on first base at the top of the 7th does not win many little league baseball games, especially when one gets so lost in their daydream that they fail to run to the next base when the ball is hit. Two runners standing on one base just does not work in the sport of baseball. Needless to say, it was an easy out.

Charles slowly made his way back to the dugout. His teammates greeted him with silence. Finally, William Ireland spoke up. William “Bud” Ireland always knew what to say, especially at difficult and awkward moments like this one. Bud turned slowly to Charles, and with gentleness and understanding said to Charles, “Charles, there is one thing that I do not understand.” Charles was not much in the mood for conversation, but wanted to be polite. “What is it, Bud?” “Charles, the one thing I have not been able to figure out is why it seems like you are trying so hard to get us to lose. I guess what I am trying to ask is... whose side are you on, anyway?”

“Whose side are you on, anyway?” This question seems to be one that is concerning John in today’s text. John recounts an occasion when the twelve witnessed a stranger to them casting out demons in Jesus’ name. What is so wrong about that? Well, who is this guy? He does not follow after “us,” so what business does he have casting out demons in the name by which we are supposed to cast out demons? John is quick to point out that since he does not “follow us,” and is at the same time casting out demons in the name of their Master, they forbade this action. Who does this guy think he is, anyway?

Jesus is quick to offer an answer. “But Jesus said, ‘Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in my name can soon afterward speak evil of me. For he who is not against us is on our side (40–41).’” Well, John gets his answer. Jesus gives to the Twelve a straight answer concerning how to identify this “someone” as one who is on their side. This “someone” uses the name!
Whose side are you on? To be brutally honest, it may be hard to tell sometimes. Well, let us try. How do you use the name—this precious name that is above all names, at which every knee should bow? How does this name flow forth from your mouth? In prayer? In praise? In thanksgiving? Do you offer a servant of the Lord a “cup of cold water” in the name? When you are asked how you regularly hear the name of the Lord, do you answer, “In the casting out of Satan, when that name is applied to water?”

Or do you use the name when you really need to make people listen, and in your frustration the name comes out of your mouth to damn that which you would never seriously damn? Do you find a good use for the name in using it to add good emphasis to an otherwise dull expression? Maybe people will not listen to you if you do not call upon the name of the Lord to begin a sentence. I bet some of you have heard a hundred different variations of how God and his name can be used in a sentence—none of them good!

So, I will ask it again, “Whose side are you on, anyway?” Sometimes it is hard to tell. So, what is so wrong with using God’s name in this way? The answer: You are not using it for all that it is, and can do. You simply cast it out as meaningless rubbish. What does it look like to those “someones” around you who see a child of God treating his name in this fashion? What result does it have for them? They stumble! And Jesus has words for that too! “But whoever causes these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea” (42). The misuse of the name has serious consequences! Causing one to stumble has serious consequences!

But, and this is a big one, oh the joy when that name is used, seen, and received rightly! For by this name demons are cast out! The one who bears this name, “being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross” (Philippians 2:8). Here we have the name for its true purpose: the forgiveness of sins, your sins; life, your life; salvation, your salvation.

In today’s text the Greek word for “cause to sin” is skandalon, scandal. However, Jesus introduces into your life a new scandal. This scandal is the scandal of the cross. Christ crucified, the stumbling block to the Jews, is at the same time taking away from you the penalty for your scandals. For the moments in your life that you do not use this name for all that it is, for the times that you cause one to stumble by not showing whose side you really are on, Christ crucified and the scandal of the cross is taking away from you the punishment you have deserved.

So what does it look like to be on his side? What does it look like to use his name in the way that it should be used? You know! You tell me! For you are the one who not only has the privilege of using the name of the Lord for all that is good, but you bear his name as one who belongs to him. You have had that name placed on you when sin, death, and the devil were cast out of you by the same
name at your baptism. This name is the name that you wake up to every morning of your life—you woke up to this name this morning! So rejoice in this name above all names that rests on you, and marks you as one saved from that place "where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."

Support and encourage others who are also on the same side and who bear the name of Jesus, using it in prayer, praise, thanksgiving, proclamation, consolation, and all that we have been given to do under this name. Give that cup of cold water. Finally, as Jesus ends this discourse, "have salt in yourselves." Those who bear and use this name bring to the world the flavor of the Holy Gospel. Think of it, you are the ones who salt the earth with the good news God offers. Whose side are you on anyway? You know! Now show your neighbor!

Kyle Castens

Proper 22 · Mark 10:2–12 · October 4, 2009

"Bending the Rules"

The question of divorce is what first meets the eye as one reads this text. To be sure, the OT reading for this day, Genesis 2:18–25, attests to it. The epistle lesson, Hebrews 2:13, however, adds a new perspective to our text. There it clearly states that disobedience of God’s law has consequences, and no violator shall escape its just punishment (v.2). It also announces our salvation perfected through Christ’s suffering, as by his obedient death on the cross he paid the price for our sinful imperfection (v.10).

Jesus had, by teaching and performing mighty works, demonstrated to those who crowed around him that in him the kingdom of God had indeed drawn closer to human beings. In our text, Jesus gradually left his ministry in Galilee and entered Judea, specifically the territory of Herod Antipas.

The Pharisees have habitually been looking for opportunities to put Jesus to the test and trap him in his own words (πΕΐραζοντ€ς, see also Mt 22:15). Neither the Pharisees nor the Herodians seem to grasp the actual purpose of Jesus’ mission on earth (8:31–32; 9:31:32). Instead, they see him simply as a threat to their own survival as teachers of the law and as those who influenced the Roman government for political gain. For any and every reason, they enlisted the help of their political enemies to create a front against Jesus, whom they assumed might have an unsettling influence on the people, contrary to their own interests.

The Pharisees had in fact built a ‘fence around the law’ in order to establish and preserve their own manmade traditions (Mark 7:9). These stringent ‘tradition of the elders’ imposed strict regulations on the pious and religious, leaving many curious loopholes for the shrewd and meticulous interpreters of the law. Like the
heretics of Colossae, these legalists were taking people captive through hollow and deceptive human tradition and the elemental spirits of this world (Col 2:8).

In our text, a question about divorce and the Mosaic provisions for it emerged out of the blue, as the Pharisees tested (πειράζοντες) Jesus. These teachers of the law prided themselves on their association with the great lawgiver Moses and invoked his stipulations in their defense (10:4). Jesus cut across the catalog of the Jewish legal tradition with a direct appeal to the law (cf. 7: 1–23; 10: 17–20), pointing out to their callous, cold-heartedness the law's divine intention. Beyond Moses, Jesus points to the higher law of creation, the divine constitution of marriage as a lifetime union of one man and one woman. Neither man nor woman has a mandate for divorce, and marriage shall remain indissoluble (vv. 5–9). If Moses permitted divorce at all (Dt 24:1–4), it was because he was ‘bending the rules’ as the people were hardening their hearts (σκληροκαρδία).

Moses may have tolerated divorce, but he had not authorized it. Even the Mosaic provisions, if read carefully, would point an accusing finger at those searching for a justifying cause of divorce. Divorce was permitted in accordance with the provisions of Deuteronomy 24:1. It was a protective provision for the woman who had been repudiated by her husband.

The Jewish tradition has since built its own fence around the law. The school of Shammai argued that ‘something shameful’ was sufficient cause for divorce. Hillel and his followers watered that down to the extent that anything that caused annoyance or embarrassment to a husband was a legitimate ground for writing a certificate of divorce from his wife. Experts in law can be experts in the art of bending the rules. Nevertheless, the question on divorce the Pharisees posed to Jesus in this context was mere trickery and hostile in its intention (William Lane, The Gospel of Mark, NICNT Eerdmans, 1974).

Hardheartedness is a deliberate determination not to abide by the will of God.

As in divorce, human selfishness threatens our proper relationship to God and fellow human beings. In this case we have not outgrown the moral and ethical stature of those who gave gone before us. Sin therefore is crouching at our door as well.

Jesus is greater than Moses, wiser than Solomon, and greater than the temple. He is the greater interpreter of the great Moses. In him all the law and the prophets find their proper meaning and fulfillment. Jesus Christ has come not to destroy the law but to fulfill it. His coming into our world under the law, and becoming sin before God in our place is evidence that he accepts us as his own. On his merits we enter God's presence with boldness, and have no need to bend the rules for our convenience.

Victor Raj
W.I.I.F.M.? That’s the question we always asked when we were preparing scripts for Lutheran Hour Ministries’ TV show, “On Main Street.” What’s in it for me? What’s in this program for the viewer—or in crafting a sermon, what’s in it for the hearer? The question isn’t intended to cater to the selfishness of people but rather to lead the preacher to prepare a sermon that will make the listener sit up and think, “This is about me! I need to hear this!”

“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus rebuts the word, “good,” beginning to humble the rich man before the transcendent greatness of God. He does understand that eternal life is a gift, “inherit,” but has yet to learn that the gift is Jesus. So Jesus draws him into deeper introspection, “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me.” Now the word was working. “The man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.”

A sermon becomes compelling when it gets into the intersection between God’s word and what’s going on in life. There’s more for the hearer in this text than the traditional line of thought: Jesus teaches that we should not rely on commandment-keeping for eternal life but follow him. Ask W.I.I.F.M.? and that truth can get deep into the hearer’s soul just as Jesus’ word went deep into the rich man.

“A Premium Goes with This Pile of Junk”

1. How have you felt during the recession? Last summer when General Motors declared bankruptcy and closed 14 plants, Don Skidmore, president of the United Auto Workers local in Willow Run, Michigan, said, “I was angry at first, then I cried, then I got angry again” (New York Times, June 2; A1). Can you identify with his feelings? But might God use your loss for your eternal life?

2. The rich young man sensed that keeping the commandments wasn’t enough for a spiritually satisfying life. He was right. Jesus told him to sell everything, literally, not figuratively, and follow Jesus. That made the young man sad, just as our losses during the recession have saddened and angered us. In painful loss we look for deliverance, for something more than a spiritualized religious lesson for our souls. We need a flesh and blood deliverer.

3. That deliverer is the Savior who loves us. “Jesus looked at him and loved him.” The Savior’s love is a patient love. He didn’t force a decision from the rich young man. He let him leave in sadness so that he could think through the satisfaction that comes from possessions and the satisfaction found in following Jesus. We can avoid focusing on our Savior by wallowing in the sorrow and anger that come from changes in our circumstances. God will let us do that (Rom 1:26), but God looks patiently through the Spirit who wants to draw us to Christ. “Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my
heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps 73:25–26). “Jesus, priceless treasure!” (LSB 743). “One thing’s needful, Lord, this treasure teach me highly to regard. All else, though it first give pleasure, is a yoke that presses hard” (LSB 536).

4. In The Grapes of Wrath John Steinbeck describes dust bowl victims selling off their implements to move west. “The men were ruthless because the past had been spoiled, but the women know how the past would cry to them in the coming days. Harness, carts, seeders, little bundles of hoes. Bring ‘em out. Pile ‘em up. Load ‘em in the wagon. Take ‘em to town. Sell ‘em for what you can get. Sell the team and the wagon, too. No more use for anything. There’s a premium goes with this pile of junk … a packet of bitterness to grow in your house and to flower, some day” (chap. 9).

5. A premium that goes with possessions. When they’re taken from us, the Spirit gives us a deeper look into what “savior” means, “We pray … that our Father in heaven would rescue us from every evil of body and soul, possessions and reputation, and finally, when our last hour comes, give us a blessed end, and graciously take us from the valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven” (Small Catechism, Lord’s Prayer).

Dale Meyer

Proper 24 · Mark 10:23–31 · October 18, 2009

From the Impossible to the Possible of God’s Grace

Introduction

We live in a world that continues place personal wealth and individualism over and against the word of God and a life a dependent on Christ. Satan tempts us to believe that you can serve two masters: worldly wealth and God’s word. Jesus says: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” The current financial tough times remind us that God’s grace takes all of us, our material concerns, and the seemingly impossible situations that many of us find ourselves in, and moves us to God, with whom all things are possible. He saves the rich and the poor alike by His grace.

I. The impossibility of man seeking salvation.

A. Rich man and the camel: a journey in priorities (vv. 23–24)

Persons of the world who continue to believe that placing the wealth of the world over and against the word of God will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Their trust is a false trust. They forget that God creator preserves them and gives them all that they need for body
and soul. There is no supplemental diet for entering God’s kingdom of grace. There is no exception ‘to the rule’.

B. Priorities of earthly living: a journey that ends in a hellish prison (v. 31)
Persons who continue to believe that they can somehow reap a heavenly reward by sowing wealth, rather than living life in Christ and accepting by faith all the blessings that God gives, both physical and spiritual, will not be first when the ‘heavenly gates’ are open. They will be last, that is, outside of the kingdom of God. This is warning that shouldn’t be ignored in a post-modern world that believes that there are many ways to enter the ‘pearly gates’. Remember the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican: get the picture?

II. The possibility of God’s grace
A. With God, all things are possible (v. 27)
We have no ‘natural powers’ to save ourselves. Our hope is not in ‘self’ for ‘self’ is god. Our hope is in the one True God, Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. Healing comes new every morning as we arise and see the sun shining. Healing begins with forgiveness of sins. For all things are possible with God. You cannot ask for any greater assurance and hope. As the writer of Hebrews states: “Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”

B. With God, the gospel never fails to keep its promise (v. 29-31)
The Gospel of Jesus Christ gives forgiveness of sins, and where there is forgiveness of sins, there is salvation and eternal life. The glory of heaven will be fully and completely received in Christ by all Christians, past, present, and future. The riches of the world pale into insignificance to the riches of living the life of Christ and the eternal life that is ours now, but not yet. The persecutions that we suffer on behalf of Christ, in a world that seeks to suffocate Christ in our witness, give us renewed perseverance and hope, and hope in Christ does not disappoint us.

Conclusion
Our sinful flesh continues to seek the material things of this world, setting the priorities of the flesh over the priorities of faith which receives all blessings, both material and spiritual. As we continue to find ourselves tempted by Satan to rest our lives on the wealth of the world, God’s grace is able by its power to remind us that we cannot save ourselves. But by God’s grace all things are possible. He who left the riches of heaven came to seek and to save the lost. We were lost in our
trespasses and sin, living in the illusion that we can somehow have ‘our cake and
eat it too.’ Not so. A Christian cannot serve two masters. As we live the life of
Christ in this world, we know, by God’s grace through faith alone, that with God,
all things are possible. Amen.

Robert W. Weise

Reformation Day · John 8:31–36 · October 25, 2009

The assignment of this text for the festival of the Reformation suggests the
question: Was the Lutheran Reformation about freedom? Luther’s famous early
work, “The Freedom of a Christian,” developed the idea of the paradoxical identity
of one who has faith in Christ: both utterly free and completely devoted to service
to others. Another writing, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” describes
how Christ’s church is held in bondage when the doctrine of the gospel is obscured
or forgotten. Luther saw human freedom in a paradoxical light, and this challenges
our individualistic assumptions. There have certainly been attempts to reinterpret
the reform of the church sparked by Luther’s discovery of the gospel in terms of
the liberation of human beings from all kinds of authority, thus removing the para­
dox of Christian freedom. Friedrich Schleiermacher, for instance, championed
complete human freedom from any religious authority whatsoever, citing 2
Corinthians 3:6 and claiming that any authoritative text “kills” and is opposed to
the autonomous freedom of the human spirit.

Such a view of freedom, of course, is congenial to the narcissistic hedonism
so prevalent in America today, but it has little to do with the words and work of
Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of John, the word-group “free/freedom” is used only
in this passage. Jesus says that his disciples—those who remain in his word—will
know the truth which will set them free (v. 32). Lest we misunderstand this “truth”
in simply propositional terms, he repeats that real freedom comes from Him. It is
the Son who sets us free (v. 36). Knowing the truth is a synonym for believing in
Jesus the Son of God. And believing in Jesus means staying rooted and immersed
in his word; being a disciple means living from what Jesus teaches and promises.

But the opposite of a free person is a slave, as Jesus’ audience understood
well enough. They insisted on their free status as descendants of Abraham, and
denied that they stood in any need of being set free (v. 33). They objected to any
suggestion that they lacked something which only Jesus could give. They wanted to
define their freedom as autonomy or sovereignty, which did not depend on Jesus.
As always, Jesus will turn their minds (and ours) away from the trivial and the
superficial, and will drive to the heart of the matter. Simply and starkly, sin is slav­
ery. This is the state of fallen human existence expressed in the words of the con­
fession of sins: “We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” When Jesus says that everyone who sins is a slave to sin, he does not remove personal responsibility. He emphasizes that, whether we recognize it or not, what we call liberty is often the worst kind of imprisonment from which we cannot engineer our own escape.

It is perhaps remarkable that Jesus spoke these rather sharp words about freedom and slavery, not to his critics or opponents but “to the Jews who had believed in him” (v. 31). Jesus’ words become even harsher in the verses immediately following our text. He tells these same people that they are trying to kill him because his word finds no place in them (v. 37) and even calls them children of the devil (v. 44). This certainly sounds provocative when directed at people who are described as “believers” in verse 31, and Christian pastors will ordinarily not address their congregations in these terms! But there should be no mistake. Jesus intends to force a clear choice between our self-constructed, self-centered ideas of freedom and identity on the one hand, and being his disciple on the other.

Every preacher whose Reformation sermon is based on this text will need to take into account what his specific hearers understand and think about freedom and slavery, because Jesus’ words will work on different people in different ways. We live in a society in which there is a broad agreement about civil rights and human rights, and such concepts and efforts to promote them are certainly not to be condemned. They are approximations of justice in the realm of active righteousness, expressions of what we call the “first use” of God’s law at work in the world to protect and preserve life. But they are not ultimate goods. Middle-class Americans, blessed with relative prosperity and political democracy, can easily be tempted to think of “freedom” as something which is their natural birthright and possession, something America does not lack but exports to others. That mistake (and sin) is closely akin to the attitude of the Jews who had believed in Jesus and claimed Abraham as their father.

And yet even in our society, there are people whose life experiences lead them to hear these words of Jesus in a rather different way. Their personal and family histories are scarred by bondage, addiction, oppression, victimization, and yes, even slavery. For them the words of Jesus their Liberator are precious gospel promises, because they know what he says about the slavery of sin is true. They are not far from the kingdom, for Jesus, by his words and his saving works, makes them free from every enemy—from sin, death, and the power of the devil.

This is a message of freedom which can sound the great theme of the Reformation powerfully and effectively, even though it does not use the familiar forensic vocabulary of justification through faith. Our observance of the Feast of the Reformation must not be allowed to degenerate into a caricature of Luther as the hero who liberated the church. The Son of God is the one who sets us free, and as disciples who remain in his word we will be free indeed.

William W. Schumacher
I would suggest that the preacher not try to “cover” the entirety of the Beatitudes; there’s too much here! For a relatively lengthy exposition, see Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1* (CPH, 2006), 234–56. Below are only a few exegetical and homiletical suggestions.

One of the major views regarding the structure of the Beatitudes sees 5:3–6 as a first section and 5:7–10 as the second major section. Matthew 5:11–12, then, repeats the eighth blessing on the persecuted, and also ends the unit and segues into the Salt and Light sayings (15:13–16).

I would suggest Matthew 5:3–6 as the text for the sermon. I offer three crucial points of exegetical theology. First, the emphatic adjective “blessed” is the equivalent of “saved” or “redeemed,” as a simple word study of μακάριος in Matthew shows (11:6; 13:16; 16:17; 24:46). It does not mean merely “happy” or “congratulations.” For people to be “blessed” in this context means they have received God’s salvation that has come into the world in Jesus of Nazareth.

Second, the supportive “for” (ότι) clauses in each of the Beatitudes provides the reason why Jesus pronounces certain kinds of people as truly blessed. The significance of these ὥτι clauses is this: that is where Jesus is located. So, the reign of heaven in Jesus belongs to the poor in spirit (5:3), final eschatological comfort will come through Jesus to those who are presently mourning (5:4), Jesus will grant the inheritance of the renewed earth to the lowly (5:5), and in Jesus God will set all things right and so satisfy the hunger and thirst of those who long for God to act (5:6).

Third, who are the people named in 5:3–6: the poor in spirit, the mourning, the lowly, and the hungry and thirsty? These are all descriptions of human need, inability, and emptiness; they are not, repeat, not positive virtues! To be poor in spirit is to be in a condition of having nothing to offer God, and no way to save oneself (see “poor” in Mt 11:5 and Is 61:1). To mourn is to acknowledge that the world is broken, and I am poor in spirit! To be lowly (not “meek” or “gentle” in a positive sense) is to be powerless; this is the Greek term (οἱ πραξεῖς) that LXX regularly employs to translate the plural of ἀρσ, those who are powerless and must look to God for salvation (Ps 37:11). When people realize that they are powerless to save themselves or redeem the world, then they hunger for God’s righteousness, that is, for God to set the world to rights as he promised he would.

In the first four Beatitudes, then, Jesus proclaims that those who have nothing are precisely the ones who receive everything from God. This is true in the present (“the reign of heaven is theirs,” 5:3) and it will be true on the Last Day (“they will be comforted,” “they will inherit,” “they will be satisfied”). To gain access to these promises, then, one bows the knee and says, “Yes, this is true. I have nothing to offer God. But I believe that I shall receive everything from him for the sake of Christ, who speaks the Beatitudes and to goes to the cross and empty tomb
for all, and who is coming again the judge the living and the dead.”

Below is a barebones, skeletal outline that would require significant contextu-
al flesh and skin. It provides the basic moves only.

“Christ Fills Empty Hands and Repairs a Broken World”

I. The world is broken, and there’s no way around it
   A. In Jesus’ ministry
      1. 4:17 Repent, because God the King has come to fix things!
      2. 4:18-22 Jesus calls people to participate in what God is doing.
      3. 4:23-25 Jesus starts repairing the broken world and he starts
         filling empty lives.
   B. In our world today, and in our lives—no pretending allowed now.
      1. It is easier to pretend when life is physically comfortable, and
         somewhat predictable, and you keep your standards lower than
         God’s.
      2. The things that need to be fixed—in our lives and in our
         world—are simply beyond our control.
   C. So, Jesus is talking about you, and about me. Do you believe that?
      1. The disciples are there, and they have begun to repent and
         believe that they are poor in spirit, mourning, lowly, and hungry
         for God to put things right.
      2. The crowds are there, and there’s a mixed bag—they’re aston-
         ished, but will they believe that Jesus is talking about them?
      3. What about you and me? Am I really and truly poor in spirit?
         Are my hands actually, completely empty?

II. The King is come into the world, and he is reigning.
   A. Jesus’ gifts are for those who come to him empty.
      1. He is not a helper, or an improver—he came to save (Mt 1:21).
      2. He healed—he cast out demons—he forgave sins.
      3. He only turned away those who thought they had something to
         offer.
   B. Jesus brings God’s kingly reign to us today.
      1. The King dies to take away my sins.
      2. The King rises to begin a new creation, and guarantee the Last
         Day.
      3. The King sends his Spirit to be in his disciples, and to work
         through us.
   C. Jesus will bring God’s kingly reign on the day when mourning is over
      and hunger and thirst are satisfied.
1. To follow Jesus is to see the brokenness of life and of the world, and to mourn and long for the right.

2. To follow Jesus is to offer yourself as an instrument, to be used for the blessing of others.

Conclusion

Empty hands are filled. Longing hearts look for the Last Day. Once filled with Jesus’ gifts, then our hands become HIS hands for others . . . merciful . . . making peace. Amen.

Jeff Gibbs
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