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Sunday's Sermon

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Easter 7 One Year Series 2017

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Easter VI (Rogate)

The Latin title for this Sunday merits a little attention. *Rogare* is the word for ask or pray in Latin. A rogation is a bill, what your utility company might put in your mailbox, asking for payment.

In the medieval church it this Sunday prior to Ascension day, likely because of the Gospel reading, came to have an emphasis on prayer and the three days which followed, Monday-Wednesday, came to be days of Rogation. Thursday is the high holy day of Ascension. In those three days people were encouraged to make petitions to God. Prayer is always a good idea and this was undoubtedly a worthy emphasis.

One has to remember, however, that the Saxons were not all that long part of the Christian fold when Luther came along. Forcibly converted by Charlemagne, pagan customs and traditions were popularly observed for a very long time, often combined with Christian elements. It appears that the days of Rogation come to be one of those mingling points.

Luther questioned the propriety of much of this very early in his career, preaching against some practices of “Cross Week” as early as 1519. It appears that processions were made into fields and prayers uttered in order to secure God’s blessing and the fertility of the fields. Luther rails against babbling and mindless repetition of prayers. We know from other locations in Europe that keeping evil spirits out of fields was a great concern. Often the procedure involved certain shamanistic rituals performed at the corners of fields.

One has to be careful here that one does not make Luther into an enlightenment figure who is against ritual or a spiritual sense. He still lived in a world inhabited by demons and evil spirits (remember the notes from Lent III). Luther’s problem with the prayers people said was that they were meaningless to them, they were babbling, a going through the motions without any real involvement of the person. It was similar to his problem with indulgences. The indulgence got in the way of a true repentance by allowing the person to go through a ritualized motion that never asked whether they truly were sorry for what they had done. He urged people to a true life of prayer, insisting in one passage that he had to pray for hours in order to get anything done.

The result is that Luther exhorts his congregants to prayer, a true and spiritual prayer, not a meaningless babbling or mindless repetition, but a prayer which flows out of that faith which the Holy Spirit imparts in baptism. While he doesn’t say it in so many words, the modern preacher who takes up this theme will want to focus on Luther’s description of prayer as embodied faith. Prayer is not some coin we insert into the divine vending machine in order to obtain a blessing, but it is the living faith which God has engendered in us being faith. This is what faith does, it turns to God, asks, depends, and expects from God. Eyes fixed on the author and perfecter of faith, we are oriented toward him, mind and body.

This means we don’t talk about prayer as much as we simply pray. To talk about it is to objectify it, to imagine that it is something that we have or hold apart from ourselves. But prayer is not something other, it is me. We are pray-ers, praying people. Baptism has made us so.

Collect of the Day

O God, the giver of all that is good, by Your holy inspiration grant that we may think those things that are right and by Your merciful guiding accomplish them; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God is the giver of all that is good. That is a pretty bold statement to make to the average North American. He or she would like to think that most of his good things are the result of his hard work and his good decisions. His investment broker compliments him on his decisions to invest through that same broker. His alma mater assures him that he made a good choice and by giving a gift he can secure such good things for another generation. Madison Avenue would tell him that his money is his to spend how he sees and feels fit, and then goes on to tell him that he can feel better and look better if he just buys this or that product. As was pointed out to me, Americans say 'have a good day.' And the usual response is "I will." The man who pointed this out is from Ethiopia and he was flabbergasted at this. He considered that a good day is a gift from God, I have no part in that! I can no more achieve a good day on my own than I can cause the sun to shine.

God is the source of all good things, not me, not my skills, not my mind, not my hard work, not my intelligence, not my will, not my luck. God gives this to me.

Today we ask him for inspiration to think right things, and more than that, we want God's guidance so we can actually accomplish them. Notice that both of these actions are things that we attribute to the Holy Spirit. Inspiration is a Spirit action. Sanctification which is the accomplishment of genuine good in our lived life is also a Spirit act.

The adjectives are also very important here. It is a "holy" inspiration that matters here. This implies that there is another sort of inspiration. One of the great insights of Luther was that the Holy of Holy Spirit was not a description of the innate nature of the Spirit, but an ascription of what he does. He is the Holy Spirit because he makes whatever he touches holy. Christians are fooling themselves if they believe they have an innate ability to discern this. This is time to trust one's baptism and the act of God in our life. The guidance of God is also described here as merciful, as in we have not earned this. Mercy is only show to the person in need, never to the innocent or the powerful.

Both of these adjectives highlight the fact that in the Spiritual realm human beings are given to participate but we also have to acknowledge that we are out of our league, like helpless children wandering the streets of a large city, we are just too easy of a target, easily deceived and easily put at a disadvantage. We need God's help for which we pray in this collect.

Readings

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵And the people spoke against God and against Moses,

“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.”⁶ Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.⁷ And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

(This text is heard on the fourth Sunday in Lent in series B. Here are the notes from the last time I treated this.)

The word for “fiery” in this text is “seraphim” the same word to describe the angelic beings who were around the throne in Isaiah’s call vision. What exactly these serpents were, is beyond our ability to parse and one should not go too far with this. At the same time, this is really interesting.

This is simply one of the most bizarre and most wonderful passages in the Old Testament, only made more so by Jesus’ quotation of it in the Gospel reading. The children of Israel, having seen the plagues in Egypt, crossing the Red Sea on dry ground, trembled at the base of Sinai, gotten up every morning to eat Manna they did not prepare or produce, still find something to complain about. Is there not something that is just basically idiotic about sin? It doesn’t make sense. One theologian simply calls it “banal.” There is a lunacy to sin, but we don’t have to snicker at ancient Israelites to see that. How much happier would we not be if we simply made an honest attempt at keeping the Ten Commandments and insisted that our televisions supported us in that endeavor. But is that what we do? Hardly! We look forward to the breaking of the next taboo or barrier just like every other man or woman. Looking at the current trajectory, how long does anyone really think it will be before broadcast television portrays complete nudity? Will this help people lead better lives? But the fact is that Hollywood would produce wholesome movies and television shows if Christians insisted that this was all they would watch. But we don’t, and they produce the trash that people are willing to pay for. As a result we fill our minds and our evenings with trash. It doesn’t make sense, but a lot of folks make money off of our predilection for sin.

The Israelites wonder why God has brought them out to die; besides they are sick of all this free lunch. They seem to say that the God who dried up the sea and humbled the Egyptians must be a loser.

God apparently had had enough of this or perhaps better said, God saw that the people have had enough of this. For their sake they needed this to stop. He sent fiery and presumably poisonous serpents among them to bite them, and they died. That seems to have focused their attention on what really matters here. Maybe the free lunch wasn’t really so bad after all. The people come to Moses and beg him to pray for them that God would take away the snakes, which apparently Moses does but God does not give the people what they want. God says, “I have a better idea.”

He doesn't take the snakes away. In fact, He tells Moses to make another snake, a bronze serpent, which he should put up on a pole, so people can see it.

Now, if they are bitten by a serpent, goes the plan, they can look up at the bronze serpent on a pole and live. There are several things in this that absolutely intrigue me. First of all, God does not take the snakes away. In fact, the solution looks a lot like the problem! We pray for God to take the problems away, but God doesn't do that. He simply gives us something to look at instead, something to believe in. He doesn't remove the cancer he says "stick your hand out and I will put the bread of life in there." I counter that the cancer or the heart disease or whatever we are praying about is killing me! God says, "Yeah, I know, here is what I am doing about it." We say we are dying and he gives us body broken and blood shed on a cross.

Then, I love the fact that Moses puts this up on a pole. I don't know about you but when there are lots of poisonous snakes slithering around on the floor, I know just where my eyes are glued – Down! God says, "Look away from the problem to my solution." That takes faith, one has to trust the one speaking, and one has to believe what he says. Otherwise my eyes are going to stay glued on the ten square feet on which I am standing lest another blasted serpent come along and make things worse. But all the vigilance in the world is not going to make it better once I am bit. It only takes one bite from those things and I am dying.

The last thing that really intrigues me about this is that God has Moses make a serpent out of bronze. Hadn't he just gotten done telling Moses and the people not to make a graven image of anything? II Kings 18:4 records that some years later king Hezekiah will have to destroy this bronze serpent because people were treating it like an idol. Serpents are the problem, why does God make the salvation look like the problem? Why doesn't he have Moses make a bronze mongoose or something that would at least be a symbol of life? Is it not because the salvation of this whole world from the bite of that ancient serpent who is Satan will in fact be Jesus hanging on a cross? It doesn't look like the death of an innocent man should be the solution, in fact, Jesus' unjust death on a cross looks like simply the worst thing that ever happened in history. Here was the one guy who did not deserve to die, he is getting the most horrible and cruel sort of execution imaginable. This is the solution? It looks like the problem to the Nth degree! Turn your eyes away from your problems and look to this? Yes! That's the solution; this is the healing that you need. Look to this man hanging on a cross, and believe that he is not just another peasant caught up in the Roman colonial machinery of death. He is the very sinless Son of God, the righteous sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. The serpent on the pole looks like the problem but it is the solution. Jesus on the cross looks like the worst this world has to offer and it turns out to be the best, God's offering to us.

For the catechumen who was coming to baptism, this probably would have had special significance. Bitten by the ancient serpent in the Fall into Sin, their baptism was a looking toward that one on a cross of whom this bronze serpent was merely a foreshadowing. But their prayers to God, while not unanswered, were perhaps not answered in quite the way they sought. God might not take away the problem, but he will give them a solution, a solution which involves

the eye of faith firmly fixed on Jesus, the beginning and end of our faith. This is part of what Jesus meant last week when he said that there were crosses for his people to bear.

This text is really about faith – the LORD is addressing their faith problem – do we have a similar faith problem today? Why don't people show up in church on Sunday mornings? Is it because the music is not just so? Is our building not appealing? Let's be honest, is it not a faith issue. If we really believe what we are doing here, how could we not be there? When I kneel at the rail someone puts the very body of Christ in my hand and he comes into me. If I really believe that I probably would not care if the hymns were fifteen verses long and sung off tune in Latin.

How do we connect those outside the community to this? I think it has everything to do with how we worship, how we come here. Is, in the words of the prayer, our service less than willing? Is our thanksgiving less than all encompassing? Is our acknowledgement other than hearty? God gives these people of Israel a real wake up. They have to believe it. Is the reason the outsiders are not flocking in here more about the fact that when we come to this altar we act as if we are going through the motions, when we pray, one has to wonder if we actually believe that someone is listening. Would you go to a church like that? Do you want to go to the one you attend now?

Sermon Idea: Help there's a snake in here! (OT lesson - That the hearer would see their problems, pray to God for deliverance, and lift their eyes in faith to the cross where God's solution for the problems of this world was given to all of us.)



Have any problems? I bet you do. Will we look it up or will we look it down? When someone asks how we are doing most of the time we will say “fine.” But how often isn't that just a bit of polite niceness. After all, who wants to hear about our problems? In fact, if we talk about them too much we are apt to be shunned at work and lose a few friends. The Old Testament lesson shows us some people with the worst problem of all, people with a God problem. Oh, they had a few snakes in their tents too, but that was just a symptom of their real problem. God had been taking care of them rather well, but it was not good enough for them. I guess waking up to a free meal every day and a pillar of cloud to guide them just wasn't quite good enough. So they complained, and accused God of mistreating them. They had a God problem you see, they did not see him clearly and they did not trust him. God's solution involved snakes. Lots of them and snakes of different kinds. Most of them were fiery and poisonous serpents that bit them and the Israelites died. They cried out to Moses, “Pray for us, we have sinned, ask God to take the snakes away.” And God says “No.” He does not

take the snakes away because within a week they would have been grouching about the manna again.

Those were not the only snakes, however. He also gave them another snake, a snake of another kind, bronze this time, and not by their feet either, but up on a pole, high above them. The other snakes did not go away, in fact they were still there biting them like before, but now they could look up, see the other snake and be saved, and not die. But there is something that has to happen for that to work. They have to have their God problem solved. They have to trust him. Snakes at my feet usually mean my eyes are glued to the floor. If I am about to look up in that situation, I have trust the one who gives me that command. I need faith. The snakes were never really their problem, and I would guess the things that you might put on your list of problems are not really the problem either. Our biggest problem is vertical, not horizontal.

God has not suspended a serpent on a cross for us to look at this morning, but as Jesus says in John 3 when he talks about this episode in Numbers, he is hung there between heaven and earth, and he draws all men and women to himself. Will you lift your eyes from the finances and the health, from the brokenness of your family and your relationships, from the worry and the stress, to look to him? When you realize that the blood he shed and the tears he wept for the sins of the whole world, and for all its woes, you will never turn your eyes back to the problems at your feet and see them the same way. The crucified and risen Jesus will dry every tear, you see. This is faith itself – to look at Jesus. If our eyes are glued on the ground and we are trusting our ability to sidestep snakes, we are trusting our nimbleness. That is the object of our faith. But this sermon calls upon us to lift our eyes to Jesus, to let him be the object of our faith, the one whom we “faith.”

In prior discussions of this sermon, we found it helpful to ask, “What is biting you? What is making it hard to look up? What is giving you pain?” However we answer this question, we will want to connect this to the deeper problem which is our God problem.

We also wanted to remember the Hebrews text that said, “Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.” Hebrews 12:2ff.

The way to end this sermon with the Gospel is to take the hearer right to the Gospel where Jesus promises to give what we ask of him. It might not look like what we expect. Even if I am facing the nasty snake who will kill me, the cancer or the heart condition which will end this life, I will close my eyes in death with them firmly fixed on Jesus who is the resurrection and life. He will give me what I need. He already has.

Psalm 107:1-9

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever!

² Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
whom he has redeemed from trouble

³ and gathered in from the lands,

from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

⁴ Some wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to a city to dwell in;

⁵ hungry and thirsty,
their soul fainted within them.

⁶ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.

⁷ He led them by a straight way
till they reached a city to dwell in.

⁸ Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wondrous works to the children of man!

⁹ For he satisfies the longing soul,
and the hungry soul he fills with good things.

This psalm fits so well and so interestingly with the OT lesson today. The Lord is good and his steadfast love endures forever. We speak that verse as a prayer at our house regularly. He has gathered his people (think Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Creed.) They wandered in the desert, they were hungry and thirsty, they cried out and God delivered them. No mention here that they were being punished because they mumbled against the Lord. No mention of the fact that God was the reason that they were suffering as he had sent the snakes. They cried, God delivered. When it comes right down to it, how I got in the predicament I am in is not nearly as important as the fact that I am in it. Is God so concerned with the fact that this woman's divorce was caused by her infidelity or is God looking at her broken life and heart? Does he really not hear her prayers because she has committed this sin and suffering its consequences?

If you use LSB in your church or have the Hymnal Supplement, consider "You Satisfy the Hungry Heart" which will pick up the last line of this psalm in a beautiful refrain.

I Timothy 2:1-6

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³ This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. ⁷ *For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.*

⁸ I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; ⁹ likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, ¹⁰ but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works. ¹¹ Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵ Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

(When this reading falls in Series C, late in the year, we get to read all the way to verse 15 which I have given us here for sake of the notes which follow. I think it is important for any preacher to be aware of just what follows this passage.)

I believe that Paul is writing to the church in Ephesus here as much as he is to Timothy himself. This letter really sounds like something that was intended to be read at the man's ordination/installation service. It is a public letter in that sense.

He knows that Timothy has a tough job in front of him. Paul himself had spent some time here in Ephesus, longer than any other single place in his missionary journeys, perhaps three years. He seems to have been imprisoned and occasioned at least one riot while he was there. It is from Ephesus that he writes first Corinthians to the troubled folks in Corinth.

Paul may well be couching his words to a specific context for the people of Ephesus. He may be contrasting the worship of God's Christian people over against the ecstatic worship of the cult of Artemis which dominated the religious scene. For Paul this would have been especially important since Artemis and Asherah were probably the same deity, at least in his mind. Baal and Asherah worship in the Old Testament Canaan always had a certain Hugh Hefner feel to it and that may well have obtained in the environs of Ephesus as well. We know that this cult used a number of women priestesses and they were served by a large body of eunuchs. It was a classic fertility cult which most likely was still making use of cultic prostitution. As a rabbinically trained Jew, Paul would have easily recognized the very Baal worship that had gotten the Old Testament folks sent off into an exile. It would have been very offensive to him, and to a great number of people in the ancient world, but still wildly popular in some quarters. I am reminded of much of what happens today. There is not a particular sin to getting tattoos, piercings, and implants, but do we really want that in our preacher? There may come a day when it is OK, but I am not sure that it is there yet.

Paul's admonition to a sober, spiritual, and yet reverential sort of worship that focused on men raising their hands in prayer may have been addressed to this climate in which the alternative was a cult led by a priestess who was scantily clothed and served by emasculated men.

Does that mean that Paul forbidding women to lead worship is limited to Ephesus? Probably not. He says much the same thing to the Corinthians. We also know of no female presbyteroi or episkopoi in the ancient church. That said, there is the difficult issue of Junia being listed

among the apostles in Paul's letter to the Romans. Is this a man with a feminine name? Not unheard of, do you know a guy who has a girl's name? But then there is also the issue of the woman who delivered and most likely read Paul's letter to the Romans to the congregation there, the Deaconess Phoebe. She would have read Paul's letter aloud in the Roman congregation. Was she engaged in delivering a "sermon" that day? Just what was that and how does that shape the way we read this statement from the letter to Timothy.

The role of women in the church is not a simple subject but many have tried to make it so. Too often preachers who thought they were proclaiming the truth, have told bright, capable, and gifted women that their service is not wanted. I don't think that is what the preacher meant to say, but that is what those women have heard. It hampers the mission of the Church, it grieves the body of Christ, and it has no place in the preaching of a Lutheran congregation.

You may find much more interesting Paul's words at the beginning of the text where he describes God. I think the preacher would do well to focus attention there. God wants all people to be saved. That's a sermon that should write itself and if you are going to talk about the role of women, that is the place to start with this text. That is the revealed will of God. He may not have revealed a plan for your life that involve whether you take that job or not, he may or may not have a plan for your next week, but he surely has a plan for this planet. He wants to save them all.

And then at the end, that strange comment that women will be saved through childbirth. This does not mean that they will be saved by giving birth, it means that God will save them during childbirth. Remember that before modern medicine having a child was a very risky thing. Many women and their babies died in the process. Paul is offering help for a real problem.

Sermon Idea: The Church at Prayer (That the hearer would offer up the prayers, supplications, thanksgivings, and more that are the mark of a faithful life.)

This sermon would cast the vision for the Church that Paul sees in this first paragraph of the Epistle reading. The world has lots of competing visions for the church right now, but Paul speaks of a body of people who are attentively listening and speaking to God. Every part of their lives are brought into this relationship with God. It is the sort of sermon which seeks to capture the whole human life and place it under the Gospel.

Prayer involves praying for folks we don't like as well. We are called to pray for politicians, for those in power and those who make the laws we don't like as well. We pray for the policeman who gave us a ticket last week. But finally this all has a missional point. God wants all people to be saved, even our neighbor whom we don't like. Praying for him will make talking to him easier. Start there.

God has in mind to use us and our lives to be a means to reach that stinker. It won't always be easy, but God really does want all people, even him, to come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved. He has put us into this time and place to be a witness of His divine love to that person. Pray for him.

Or

James 1:22-27

²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

²⁶ If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Luther did not like this text, in fact in his Postils he suggests dropping it and substituting I Corinthians 15.

But Luther was speaking to a generation which thought it needed to earn heaven. It had drunk deeply of medieval Catholicism's distortion of that Word and this seemed to reinforce that. We preach to a very different generation. Human nature will always want to turn God's gracious gift into something we purchase with our life, our faith, our goodness of some sort. Luther's concerns have certainly not gone away, but already in his day he was starting to rail against those who thought the law was optional. These are the libertine and those who turn the gospel into a license to sin, or at least a license to do nothing. I am a Christian, I have been baptized and confirmed, I cannot imagine that I can do much to alleviate hunger, poverty, the breakdown of the family, or even the problems of my neighbors, so I will do nothing. I will keep my head down, put my check in the offering plate, attend services, and be a "good" person.

But James will hear none of that and I am not sure that our generation does not need James as much as it needs Galatians and Romans. We have come a long way from Tertullian's observation that Christians were known for the love they showed one another. The Christians of the first generations would pick up abandoned children and give them homes. When there was an epidemic, they took care of the sick people. When you were hungry in Rome, the Christians would give you something to eat. That is what they were known for. Today we are known for opposing any number of sins, fighting with one another, charlatan TV preachers and pedophile priests.

James might have some things to say to us. The pure religion is a religion which does the merciful act which reflects the mercy God has shown to us. This is not in some opposition to Paul or Article IV of the Augsburg Confession. This is the perfect Law to which the Christian is obedient in Article VI of that same confessional document. Notice the collect of the day – we pray for the gift of God that we would do the good things he would have us do. There really is a blessing in this doing. It is not the blessing of earning salvation, of course. But it is the blessing of being in step with Christ, of looking like him, just a little bit. The blessings come in many

forms and some of them are hard to see. The world might not consider you blest, but don't let that bother you.

Sermon Idea: The Law of Liberty (That the Holy Spirit would inspire joyful, merry obedience in the hearer.)

Like several of the sermons we have proposed in this Easter season, this sermon might simply ask what Jesus is doing right now. He has risen from the dead, but he is not just ambling around heaven making interior decorating decisions in anticipation of the last day. He has risen from the dead so he can be active in our lives right now.

Today James calls us to consider that Jesus has changed us and the living of our lives. This is not some thing we must do to earn his love. Get that off the table immediately. But just because we are not earning heaven does not mean that Jesus is unconcerned with the living of our life or that he does not have blessings for us in the living of life.

James calls it the Law of Liberty and encourages us to persevere in it. That phrase law of Liberty might give the preacher a chance to explore what he means. We often think the law constrains us, binds us, and keeps us from what we want to do. But the law also gives permission. The Law to which James refers is the same Law Paul speaks of in Romans 12 when he speaks of the renewal of our minds or in Galatians 2 and following when he speaks of the freedom of the Christian as having Christ living in us. This Law of liberty is an obedience to a heavenly shape, rule, type, pattern, but not some slavish obedience which toils under lash or reward. This is the loving obedience of a child, the tender obedience of a parent who lifts the crying infant from the crib. This is the lover who follows her beloved across the dance floor and delights in every moment of it.

Here you will want some examples. I know a woman who, when she was confirmed, her pastor suggested she teach Sunday school. It was a good fit. While I served that same parish she finally quit after 69 years teaching fourth graders. She was teaching the grandchildren of some of the people she had taught. She loved it. Fourth graders were her favorite. They clearly loved her because she loved them. Christ called her to an obedience of a law of liberty.

Jesus is shaping and calling and moving his people today through the outpoured Holy Spirit. He is doing that to you too!

John 16:23-30 (31-33)

²³In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. ²⁴Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

²⁵“I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. ²⁶In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; ²⁷for the Father

himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. ²⁸ I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.”

²⁹ His disciples said, “Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! ³⁰ Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God.” ³¹ Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? ³² Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. ³³ I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

Luther

(Note: The reader is encouraged to read the entire treatment of prayer and the second sermon on prayer in LW Vol. 77. For the sake of space I have had to edit heavily.)

1. We are accustomed to use this Gospel reading on this Sunday because it teaches about prayer, and this week is called Cross Week, in which people are accustomed to pray and to go about with crosses. Those who first instituted perhaps meant well, but it turned out poorly. In the processions many unchristian things took place up until now, while nothing at all or very little was prayed, so that they were rightly abolished and discontinued. I have often admonished that we should continue praying, for there is great need of it. However, now that the outward babbling and muttering of prayers has ended, we no longer pray at all. From that we also become conscious that previously, among so many prayers, we prayed nothing at all.
2. The Lord points out five things here that are necessary for true prayer. The first is God’s promise, which is the basis, power, and chief thing in every prayer. He promises here that what we pray for will be given to us. He takes an oath on that and says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for something in My name, He will give it to you,” so that we should be certain that we are heard in prayer. He even reprimands them for being lazy and not having prayed at all. It is as if He wanted to say, “God is ready to give more quickly and much more than you ask; He even offers His benefits if we will only take them.” It is truly a great shame and a harsh punishment among us Christians that He should still reproach us for our laziness in prayer and that we do not let such rich and excellent promises incite us to pray. We leave this precious treasure lying there and do not attempt or use to experience the power in such promises.
5. The second point which belongs to this Promise is faith, namely, that we believe that the promise is true and do not doubt that God will give what He promises, for the words of the promise require faith. However, faith is a firm, undoubting confidence that God’s promise is true, as James says: “If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives in simplicity and reproaches no one, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith and not doubt, for

whoever doubts is like the waves of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. Such a person should not think that he will receive anything from God” (James 1:5-7). Whoever doubts in his heart and yet prays tempts God, for he doubts God’s will and grace. Therefore his prayer is nothing, and gropes for God like a blind man gropes for the wall [Is. 59:10].

6. Try it now and pray in this way, and you will experience the sweetness of God’s promise, that is, what courage and cheerful heart it produces for praying for all kinds of things, no matter how great and high the request may be.

8. The third point is that we must name something for which we are asking God, such as when you ask for strong faith, love, peace, and consolation for your neighbor. We must point out the needs, just as the Lord’s Prayer presents seven needs. This is what Christ means with the words “if you ask for something” – something, that is, something you need.

9. The fourth point is that we must desire or wish that it happen, which is nothing other than asking as Christ says, “Ask.” Others have called this *ascensus mentis in Deum*, that is, the heart rises and soars up to God, and desires something from Him, and for that reason sighs and says, “If only I had this or that!”

10. The fifth point is that we ask in Christ’s name, which is nothing other than that we come before God with faith in Christ and confidently take comfort that He is our Mediator, through whom all things are given to us and without whom we deserve nothing but wrath and enmity.

11. Here we see that all five points prayer can certainly happen in the heart, without any oral babbling, though what the mouth says is certainly not to be despised but is necessary to kindle and incite inner prayer in the heart. However, the additions [to prayer], of which I have written enough elsewhere, should and must be set aside; namely, we are not to specify for God the time, speed, person, place, and limit, but confidently leave all of that to His will. We are only to cling to asking, and not doubt that the prayer is heard and that it is already arranged that what we asked for will be given, as certainly as if we already had it... Those, however, who set the time, speed, place, and limit tempt God and do not believe that they are heard or that they have obtained that for which they asked. Therefore, nothing will be given to them.

(*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 77. CPH, 2014. Pp. 252-259.)

Sermon Idea: He will give it to you (Goal: That the hearer prays)

We have asked before and do so again: Having risen from the dead, just what is Jesus doing, right now, today? I am not sure that many of our congregants would be able to answer that question very concretely or surely. I think too many of us imagine Jesus sitting on a throne somewhere far away and listening to angelic choirs singing celestial songs. I rather have an image of Jesus absent-mindedly drumming his fingers on the arm of that throne. It sounds boring and I think many people think heaven will be boring.

I think this is exactly the wrong image of Jesus and what he is doing right now. He rose from the dead because you need him alive, right now. He is not only on that heavenly throne, but he is right here, right now. The “right hand of God” is not a geographic location but a statement of the power and authority he wields on our behalf.

Today he makes an astounding promise to us – he invites our prayer because he and the Father will listen to us. Jesus even says that he won’t need to convey our prayer to the Father, for the Father loves us. He himself listens to us because we are praying in the name of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

I used to tell my parishioners that there were only three children who could ever really disrupt one of my sermons – my own children. As their father, I could not tune them out. Jesus seems to be saying that to us today about God. When we pray in Jesus’ name, God will listen to us and hear us with the fatherly, indulgent heart that will not deny our prayer.

Dr. Luther has some very important words about that at the end of the excerpt above. This is not to say that we get to control God like some petulant and spoiled teenager who has her father wrapped around her little finger. God remains God and we remain the creatures and his answer to our prayer comes in his time, in his way, in his providential care. But the Christian may own this fact and count on it – God has heard that prayer and he does act on it. What exactly He will do I cannot say for I am not God, but he will act. It may be in raising me from the dead. It may be in causing that blockage in my enemy’s heart to finally kick loose and either soften him to my cause or kill him. But something will happen because I have prayed.

Moderns ask strange questions about prayer. Did you see the film, *Bruce Almighty*? In it the character is given to be God for a brief time and he hears the prayers of all the people as a jumbled and confusing babble of voices. But remember that God is the creator. When he says he will make time to listen to you, he is not pushing something else aside, he literally can make time to listen. If that is six billion moments to hear six billion prayers – he can do that. He is not constrained by time like we are. Jesus was wonderful for this. He seemed always to listen intently to the person who was right before him, often leading them aside the better to hear them. How often doesn’t he ask people, “what do you want?” God really wants to hear that prayer.

Luther’s notes above on prayer really hinge on faith. The preacher will not want to talk about prayer as a thing, but as who we are. We are praying people. That is what it means to “faith” in God. He is the answer to our problems, so we bring them to him. He is the resurrection, the way, the life, and the truth; so, we talk to him about these things. We confess that we are afraid, sad, lonely, weak, sick, poor, hungry, tired, and anxious. He has died for all these things. And he hears our confessions of who we are and loves, sustains, comforts, helps, and befriends us. This is simply faith embodied. It is not some activity which we might do like going to the gym or taking up gardening. Prayer is to the Christian life as breathing is to the mortal life.

We will pray, but the question is who is the addressed recipient of our prayers. Another way to see this is to think of it in terms of idolatry. Our god will be the thing we believe can answer

these deepest questions and satisfy these deepest needs. We will pray to that person or thing, but is it something other than the Father who sent the Son and poured out the Spirit? Is it myself? Is it my resources? Is it my smartphone? Our culture has told us that we can be whatever we want to be, we can have it our way, we can achieve our highest dreams, and we can define our very selves. That is idolatrous. If we believe those things, we will pray that way, looking inward for our answers.

Jesus promises us today that there is another who longs to hear those prayers from us. He has established that relationship in Baptism and sustained it at this altar and from this pulpit. His ears are open to listen to you because he loves you. Be his person – pray.

(These words from John's Gospel are heard in series C on this same sixth Sunday of Easter. Here are the notes and a sermon from the last time we dealt with this text.)

Last week Jesus told us that he gives an unassailable joy, a joy which the world cannot take away. Today he speaks of a courage, a courage which is rooted not in our victory but in him. In truth, our victory may be far off. He speaks of us being scattered and even leaving Christ alone. He references his day of trial and death, but also this day. Jesus speaks to his feckless disciples not to chide, warn, or even condemn them, though they surely deserve it. He speaks to them to give them peace, because in the world they will have tribulation, but in him they have peace. Though they will each abandon him, some more spectacularly than others, He will not leave them, he will not abandon them, he will overcome the world. They will know his peace.

There are two places I think that the preacher may want to look here.

In the first paragraph Jesus exhorts his disciples to pray in his name, and promises them that those prayers are heard and answered. The fullness of their joy hangs on their prayers being answered in Christ. He is the high priest who connects God and the world, the gateway, the access point. In the verses which immediately follow this Jesus will pray for them and for us.

The second point comes at the end of the reading in which Jesus tells them that they will surely run away. But he tells them so they may have peace, not fear. He knows that you are a failure as a follower, that is why he came to seek and save the lost, that is why he came to die for this world's sin, all of it, even yours. He has overcome the world, even that world that has so frightened me and caused me to run away. He would that we take heart today, because he has won the victory over my sin, the real thing that resides in my heart, which makes me afraid even of God. He has overcome the world. So now, even when I turn my eye inward and I see my own miserable self, I know that Jesus has overcome that too. Jesus speaks hours before his disciples will betray and abandon him, he is concerned that they will feel that they have lost their opportunity, their chance at heaven. He tells them that he knows this will happen, he loves them anyway, he has overcome even the fear and the deceit which resides at the heart of any of us.

Verse 23 has occasioned some discussion in the past. Jesus seems to promise us that we get what we ask for. Yet, all of us have had the prayer denied. While mature faith has often wrestled

through this, there are many who continue to struggle with these words of Jesus. What do we say about them? The wisdom of the group from years past was not an easy or a quick answer. This is hard.

We have to separate want from need.

God's time is not our time – he may be giving, but it seems like a long time to us. It is frustrating to us.

Is the request really in the name of Jesus? Indeed is the Ferrari a prayer made in faith? But what about the sincere and faithful request to see a congregation thrive or a sick person's health. Is this a matter of the alignment of our will with God's will? (See the discussion under the Collect.)

The struggle seems to be that Jesus promises God will give, but that is not our experience.

Other Scriptural places? Matthew 18 has a similar sentiment. Paul in II Corinthians says that in Christ all things belong to us. (My neighbors new Volvo?)

Ultimately we have a challenge in this text. How do we understand this promise? It seems that we have a promise which is not being fulfilled.

We thought that perhaps if we were not seeing our prayers answered, it may be that we are asking for something outside of God's will.

This is not a word which can be read in isolation. Paul prayed for healing, it did not happen. This is not a simple answer, and the desire for a simple answer may not be reasonable. God is quite willing to let us be uncomfortable sometimes.

Sermon Idea: “My Cheatin’ Heart” (That the hearer would take comfort and joy from the fact that Christ has long known my feckless heart, and he loves me anyway. Indeed, he so treasures the relationship with his disciples that he lays the groundwork for their return before they commit the sin he knows is coming.)

This sermon is a classic proclamation of Gospel to the terrified conscience. It may seem like we have done this before, but don't lose sight of the fact that this is a message which bears repetition, lots of repetition. In the same way that we cannot simply say “I love you.” to our spouse and call it good for the next fifty years, we cannot simply tell people God loves them despite themselves and expect that they won't need to hear that message again and again. Our enemy is constantly whispering in our ears that we are deceiving ourselves and God does not really love us. The rules which fill our lives repeatedly tell us that we have transgressed. The very nature of our human relationships is so often based on merit, history, failure, and scale balancing. Many of our people are sitting in pews wondering if God can really love them. Would you say that he does if you know what is in their hearts, what they are feeling? They are asking that question.

This is a sermon to tell that person who is convinced that they are thoroughly wicked that they are right, but God loves them despite that. Jesus speaks amazing words of tenderness and love to his disciples today. This is the reason we are still talking resurrection today. Jesus has risen, he lives, he reigns, he is present in our lives, and he doesn't turn from us in disgust but he loves us deeply and wholly.

A potent story of forgiveness would work here. Three years ago we spoke of a woman whose past was creeping forward to poison her marriage. Her pastor was able to hear that confession and tell her that Christ had taken all that into himself, it was removed from her shoulders, and taken from this new relationship which God wanted her to have, which God blessed and delighted in with her. Too many of our parishioners think that they have something inside their past or heart which means they are out of God's favor. I know a woman who tormented herself because she was sure that her infertility was God's punishment for what she had done.

Too often we don't let the Law do its work on people and we jump to the Gospel/absolution so quickly that it sounds superficial to people. This is the sort of sermon in which you have to let the law grind a little, to bring them to the point of being ready to hear what Jesus says to them.