

**RECONCILIATION
& HEALING**

SERMONS AND COMMENTS

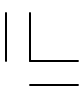
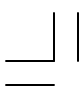
FROM THE

2007

Preaching Excellence Program

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VOL. XVI



Reconciliation & Healing
Comments and Sermons
From the 2007 Preaching Excellence Program: Vol. XVI

Edited by
The Rev. Dr. Timothy J. Mulder
and
Fred T. Rossi

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Since 1992, the Episcopal Preaching Foundation has collected and edited outstanding American sermons, supported their publication annually in book form and distributed them to the Foundation's constituents. The tradition continues with this volume.

As of last year, we now are concentrating our books on our annual Preaching Excellence Program (PEP). This year, the 20th annual PEP Conference was held in early June at Villanova University outside Philadelphia, and this book contains the sermons and addresses delivered by the faculty at that Conference as well as some of the excellent student sermons.

As in past years, seminarians who attended the Conference were selected by their seminary deans and preaching professors for their potential in preaching, and were led by a faculty of 17 excellent preaching professors and accomplished parish preachers. Also helping the seminarians improve their preaching skills in this all-expenses-paid, concentrated week of learning was special guest the Rev. Dr. Thomas H. Troeger, the J. Edward and Ruth Cox Lanz Professor of Christian Communications at Yale Divinity School.

The seminarians benefited immensely from the sermons and lectures on preaching by the pros and from interaction with them. In small groups, each led by two faculty members, all the seminarians delivered prepared sermons that were then discussed in detail by their groups. They also preached sermons they wrote with the benefit of the faculty's help during that week. A total of 62 of them benefited from this "boot camp for preachers."

As you read these sermons and comments about PEP by the attendees, I hope you agree that the Foundation is making significant strides in improving preaching in the Episcopal Church.

A. Gary Shilling
Chairman
Episcopal Preaching Foundation
September 2007

PREFACE

The nature of this book has changed over the 16 years that the Episcopal Preaching Foundation has been publishing sermons. In the early years, there was a solicitation for sermons, the best of which would be awarded a prize. Eventually the prize went away but excellent sermons on given topics were still solicited and published under the title of “Sermons That Work.” They included sermons from the PEP faculty, but also from throughout the Church. Then, beginning in 2006, we began to just publish the sermons of the PEP faculty. This year we decided to include several sermons from students as well.

The purpose of the Preaching Excellence Program (PEP) is not to polish the skills of the top of the trade, but to support and encourage preaching throughout the Church. We begin at the beginning of people’s ordained ministry. PEP is for seminarians and those who help train and encourage seminarians. A phrase that aptly catches our intentions these days is that PEP is a laboratory for the making of sermons rather than a gallery to exhibit masterworks.

This book is a sharing of work, often in progress, by those of us who consider ourselves students of preaching, whether we are the seminarian, the professor or priest on the faculty for the week. These sermons will give the reader a taste of what happens at PEP. They offer a glimpse at the diversity of approaches to preaching and articulation of faith.

These sermons are printed, but the Foundation is discussing additional ways for us to present the sermons that are given at PEP. Should we use the emerging vehicle of YouTube or create PEP DVDs? While the reader might wonder why we would put our ponderings out in the open like this, we think if you have this book in your hand, then you care about preaching, too, and because you wonder where preaching is headed in the future. We are partners in the proclamation of the Gospel. We invite you to support the work of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation, support the work of seminaries, support the work of students and teachers and support the work of your parish priests, deacon or lay preacher. Pray that God will guide and bless those who preach and those who hear.

Timothy J. Mulder
Executive Director

**COMMENTS FROM SEMINARIANS ATTENDING
2007 PREACHING EXCELLENCE CONFERENCE**

The following comments came from the evaluations students were asked to complete following PEP. In most cases people responding do not sign their name, but we think you will get a sense from these comments about the variety and depth of the PEP experience.

“I learned to be brave and try new things in preaching.”

—Susan Ironside, New Brunswick Theological Seminary

“I gained the confidence that God gives me the tools to do this. I can prepare a sermon a week without being mired in uncertainty for days.”

“Better preaching demands more time in prayer!”

“The conference pushed me from ‘a sermon style’ to ‘range of sermon styles.’”

—Jamie Sanders

“This is probably the best, most useful conference I have ever attended of any kind.”

—Philip Hubbard

“John Dally’s explanation of preaching to cognitive, intuitive and emotive levels was very useful.”

—Shelly Denney

“I appreciated the clearer links between hymnody and homiletics.”

“It was helpful to learn some categories for giving feedback after a sermon.”

“The schedule was perfect; just when we got tired, we had time to rejuvenate. I especially appreciated the mini-retreat at the middle of the week.”

“Tom Troeger’s use of multiple intelligences was so helpful for how to construct a sermon using different approaches to what makes people tick.”

“I learned that different people preach in different ways and different people listen in different ways – and that is OK!”

“Being affirmed in my preaching by my peer groups was so wonderful.”

“Virginia Wile’s work in creativity gave me permission to try things with the text and in my preaching that I’d never imagined before.”

“I learned to be more sensitive to how people hear what I say.”

“It was great to have to construct a sermon while at the conference and to learn that I can write a good sermon in three hours and without a library.”

“The best part was being able to listen to a variety of extremely well-crafted sermons rooted in one theme—but presented in entirely different styles.”

“I leave with excitement, enthusiasm and feeling affirmed.”

“Meeting students from other seminaries was a gift.”

“What an honor this has been. What growth I have experienced!”

“I am preaching this summer in a small church near Athens and definitely putting to use what I learned at PEP.”

—Leslie A. Flemming, Bexley Hall Seminary

“ASLEEP OR AWAKE?”

The Rev. Dr. Thomas H. Troeger
Yale Divinity School/Berkeley
& Institute of Sacred Music

Luke 24: 28-35

A fourth century Roman tomb
pictures two people
at the foot of the empty cross.

One is a soldier.
He is seated on a rock.
There is a large sword
in front of him.
The tip of the sword
is in the ground.
His arms are crossed
and resting on the hilt of the sword.
His arms form a pillow
for his head.

The soldier's eyes
are closed.
He is sound asleep.
The sword is propping him up.
If you took away the sword,
he would fall over.

The other person is a woman.
She has no sword.
She has no armor.
Her arms are open.
Her hands are held
with the palms facing upward,
Her head tilts upward
with open eyes.

Above the cross beam
and towering over the soldier and the woman
is a wreath of victory.
Inside the wreath
are the Roman letters
that stand for Jesus Christ.
The wreath and the letters
were an early Christian symbol
for the resurrection.

The sculpture
is a sermon in stone.
Although there are no words,
it asks a simple but profound question:

Are we,
like the soldier,
asleep to the resurrection of Christ?
Or
are we,
like the woman,
awake to the resurrection of Christ?

In the sculpture
the sword stands for violence.
It represents the power
of the Roman Empire.

Resting on his sword,
resting on power and authority,
the soldier
is asleep to the risen Christ.

But the woman
has taken a posture
of alertness.
Her head is up.
Her hands are open.

Her eyes are open.
This was the posture
of early Christians
when they were praying.

Prayer keeps the woman awake
to the risen Christ.

But dependence
upon the sword,
upon violence and power
keeps the soldier asleep
to the risen Christ.

Through the image
of the sleeping soldier
propped up by his sword,
the artist is asking us:
what are we leaning on
that keeps us asleep
to the risen Christ?

Many of the New Testament stories
about the resurrection
reveal how the church
was initially asleep to the risen Christ.
Not literally asleep,
but asleep in their minds and hearts,
asleep in their spirits.

In Luke,
the two disciples on the road to Emmaus
are so distraught
by the death of Christ,
that they are sleep
to his presence as he walks with them.

In the gospel of John
Mary is weeping so hard

she mistakes the risen Christ
for a gardener.

And also in the gospel of John,
the disciples who have gone fishing
do not immediately
recognize that the stranger on the shore
is Christ.

These stories
ask us the same question
that the sculpture
of the soldier and the woman
asks:
Are we
asleep
or
awake
to the risen Christ?

I recall when I was once
like the disciples
on the road to Emmaus.

I was sad because
I was midway on a journey,
far away from my wife
and sad
because we would
be apart for a long time.

I had stopped
in a big city bus station
to wait for my next bus.
I was drinking coffee
in the shabby bus station café
when an old woman
sat down next to me.

She wore a threadbare overcoat
and was obviously poor.
But she was well spoken,
and had a tender looking face.

She asked why I was sad.
I told her.
Then she started
talking in a gentle way
about love and marriage,
husbands and wives,
the joy and sadness of human life.

She asked the waitress
to bring us a donut.
It was the last one
in the little café.

The old woman
broke the donut
and gave me half of it,
saying, "Take this.
It will help you."

Then her bus was announced
on the loudspeaker.
She got up and left quickly.

As I finished eating the donut
and she vanished out the door,
I recalled Luke's words
about the road to Emmaus:
how Christ
"took bread, blessed and broke it,
and gave it to them.
Then their eyes were opened
and they recognized Christ;
and he vanished from their sight."

I had been asleep
to the risen Christ.
But now I was awake.

For a moment
I became like that woman
in the sculpture.
Her head up.
Her eyes open.
Her hands open.
Her heart and mind
fully awake to the resurrection of Christ.

What about you?
Are you asleep or awake
to Christ who comes to us
in such unexpected ways?

Editor's Note: Most of Dr. Troeger's sermons are not written because he usually preaches, as he puts it, "from a prepared heart." However, when he does have a manuscript, he writes it as he intends to speak it. It has the look of poetry rather than prose, because it is intended to be spoken rather than read. I know another preacher who folds a single sheet in quarters. He has a single sentence in each. It's usually enough to get him from a good start to a fine finish. What writing style works best for your spoken proclamation of the Gospel?

“A SERMON PREACHED”

at Morning Prayers on Tuesday, June 5, 2007
by the Rev. Dr. Mitties DeChamplain
Trinity Church Professor of Preaching
The General Theological Seminary

Colossians 1:11-20

Question: Are the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion falling apart? This is not a rhetorical question, by the way. So, once again, are the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion falling apart? I hear some emphatic *yes*'s and *no*'s. What a relief! There is division of opinion among us—sounds like the Episcopal Church that I know and love. So what's the answer? Well, I'm not really sure. The answer to the question naturally depends on your point of view, your way of seeing God and church.

I became an Episcopalian in 1980 at thirty-something years of age. Having come from a fundamental bible church background, I was over the rainbow with pride to be identified with a communion characterized by James Pike and Norman Pittenger as “the roomiest Church in Christendom”. . . not because it does not care about what people believe, but because it knows that the truth of the Christian Gospel is so wonderfully rich and so infinitely great that no single human expression can exhaust all its truth and splendor.”¹ And I am still proud and humbled by the wonderful words of The Reverend Elizabeth Templeton addressed to the bishops at the 1988 Lambeth Conference. In her remarks she congratulated the Anglican Communion for what she called its “blessed generosity across parties, camps, styles, and dogma. Internally and in relation to other evolving Christian life-forms, [she said], you are conspicuously unclassifiable—a kind of ecclesiastical duck-billed platypus. . . That remarkable openness of being is to be celebrated and not deplored. Your costly openness is a gift to other churches and a gift to the world.”²

I have to believe that a cruciform image of Christ somehow informed Templeton's celebration of our peculiar way of being church. But the question still remains: Are the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion falling apart? Well, the *institutional reality* is that we may not, at the end of the day, be able to hold everything together. Breakaway congregations and dioceses appear to be an ecclesiastical fact of life these days. Our “blessed generosity” with those who disagree seems to be in very short supply lately. But the *theological reality* is that we cannot

dissolve what God in Christ has joined together in baptism. The Episcopal Church is, after all, bold to claim in our prayer book that “the bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble.”³ I take this to mean that no one can ultimately destroy what God has created by grace.

The lesson we just heard this morning from Colossians is for me a ravishing, extravagant re-affirmation of our “indissoluble” unity in Christ and of the spiritual impossibility of fracturing our communion:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; . . . for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.⁴

The peace that Christ made once for all through the blood of his cross is the ultimate demonstration of God’s all-embracing, all inclusive love—the kind of love that moved him to stretch out his arms on that hard wood in an act of agonizing solidarity—in order to draw the whole world to himself. And surely, Paul’s unwavering belief in Christ’s resurrection and ascension must be what enables him to make the rhapsodic affirmation that “in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven.”

Here on earth, we may sing in church of being rent asunder by schisms and being gravely distressed by heresies. We are creatures prone to division and divisiveness. But way beyond our capacity to break apart and disintegrate is God’s unflinching capacity to hold all things together—to hold us together—in Christ.

The peace that Christ makes through the blood of his cross is not, of course, the occasion for complacency but for action. The peace that Christ makes through the blood of his cross does not mean the absence of conflict, or turbulence, or difficulty, but the very presence of Christ’s love in everyone and for everyone and everything. [Christ in mouth of friend and stranger]. The peace that Christ makes through the blood of his cross sustains us when in the midst of “fiery trials”; it is this peace that enables each and every one of us to press on regardless of those things that we find discouraging and disabling.

What does the peace that Christ makes through the blood of his cross mean for our ministries of proclamation? Well, I reckon it does not mean that we labor hard in everything we say to make the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion happy and serene ecclesiastical campers—bending over backwards to avoid disagreement, turbulence, and discord. But if the Crucified One is the image that we are to conform to, then our preaching surely must involve non-coercive strategies of embrace—open-handed invitation, and not closed-fisted exhortation. Preaching reconciliation is about imagining and visualizing for people what it looks like to live into the peace granted to everyone in baptism. For it is the peace that Christ makes through the blood of his cross which impels us to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. This peace that Christ still makes on the cross is what strengthens us to strive for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Nobody in our time reflects on the cruciform preaching life more powerfully than Kenneth Leech in *We Preach Christ Crucified*, where he asserts that the cross “needs to be preached with confidence, not with arrogance, but in the utter conviction that in this man on the cross lies the hope of all humankind. . . It is of the greatest importance that Christians preach the good news of Christ crucified with humility, gentleness and love, not using the cross as a weapon, but bearing witness to our belief that here God’s love and compassion was most clearly shown.”⁵

What then will our preaching the good news of God in Christ by word and example look like? It seems to me that the third chapter of Colossians holds the homiletical key, when Paul writes: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”⁶ Clothing ourselves humbly and kindly in word and in action is, of course, an enormous challenge in our fiercely divided church. It is something that cannot be done at all without God’s help. We cannot hold the church together, but in Christ “all things hold together.” Any word of truth that we speak can only be spoken by the grace of Jesus Christ in every one of us.

And so, dear preachers of God, my prayer is this: “May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the

light.”⁷ And when the church seems to be falling apart and breaking away, remember that Christ—in whose name we are baptized and called to preach—binds us together with cords that cannot be broken. Christ binds us together with love. There is no firmer a foundation than this.

¹ David Hein and Gardiner Stattuck Jr. *The Episcopalians* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publications, 2004), pp. 273-274.

² Transcribed from Part III of a VHS series: *The Story of Anglicanism*. Narrated by Michael York. (Westlake Village, CA: Cathedral Films and Video, 1990).

³ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), p. 298.

⁴ Colossians 1:15-18a, 19-20.

⁵ Kenneth Leech, *We Preach Christ Crucified*. Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 2005), p. 93.

⁶ Colossians 3:12-14.

⁷ Colossians 1:11-12.

“WHATEVER”

The Rev. Dr. William Brosend
School of Theology, University of the South, Sewanee
Compline, June 4, 2007

Philippians 4:4-9

I'm homiletically paralyzed. I can't pray, invite you to sit, or tell a joke. I don't know whether to use a cognitive or intuitive opening, and not only have I never preached at compline before, I've never heard a sermon preached at compline. I feel like a golfer who in trying to remember the seventeen steps to a successful golf swing becomes so immobilized between turning his hips and locking his elbow he is never able to walk upright again.

That happens at conferences like this, happens in the homiletics classroom, and may well happen in our preaching groups. We become intentionally self-conscious about our preaching in ways we do not in church, sometimes for good, and sometimes not. It helps to remember that preaching is not an end in itself, and that people did not come to church just to hear us, they came to worship God. At the close of day, in the beauty of worship, in the communion of our prayer together, we need to let go of some of the how to's and what not's and just preach.

Philippians is a favorite letter for many, even for those of us who are not all that fond of Paul. It begins with loving words of remembrance that in this instance, unlike, say, Second Corinthians, do not ring falsely, moves to the Apostle's painful deliberation about suicide/martyrdom, and on to the famous, fabulous hymn of the second chapter. By the time we get to the verses we just heard Paul has pondered his travel plans, indulged in his customary non-boasting boasting, and tossed out his rubbish so that he can press on for the prize. He's asked the Philippians to play nice, told Euodia and Syntyche to make up, and is winding things down with a memorable finish.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

I love these verses. They are happy, sappy, and when you analyze them, almost a little silly. And I don't care. Maybe it is because I don't think there is enough rejoicing in most of our lives and our parishes, that gentleness is a misunderstood and underappreciated virtue, and we can never be reminded too often to "let go and let God." I like the list – true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, praiseworthy – and the careful juxtaposition of the peace of God and the God of peace. And above all, I appreciate the Apostle's persistent willingness to do something most of us spend a life time trying to avoid: being an example to others of a faithful life well-lived.

Will Willimon tells of being greeted by a well-wisher after a service with, "Dr Willimon, some day I want to preach just like you." Will hemmed and hawed and sputtered nonsense about finding your own voice until he realized that what he was really saying was, "Don't look at me. I don't want to be your example! Find somebody else."

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do. No way. Okay, maybe what you have heard, but for heaven's sake not what you have seen. I don't want you looking at me. Except, of course, someone is, and when they aren't, You Know Who is anyway so they might as well be.

But what finally captivates me is the list of "whatevers," and not just because as the father of a sixteen year old daughter I hear that word a lot. "Whatever" not as a dismissive but as an invitation. The idea of consciously turning our minds and tuning our hearts toward virtues and values of excellence and praise is audacious, naïve, and, you know what, effective. A local Philadelphia evangelical institution, Tony Campolo, loves to remind us that we can only be peacemakers by making peace, lovers by loving, and more compassionate and committed by acting out our commitments with passion and compassion. What we lift up is what we will follow, and vice versa. Your list doesn't have to be Paul's. Mine certainly isn't. But it is helpful to be self-conscious about what our list is. What do you think is commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise?

Whatever it is, my guess is we would all like to see it. And see more of it. A lot more of it.

Editor's note: This is a wonderful opportunity to say something about what happens not infrequently at PEP. The Holy Spirit intervened...again. The sermon just presented is what Dr. Brosend intended to preach, but did not. Instead, he delivered a homily on the text that brought us deep into the life of a family, a family we have all lived in, one that needed to stop some habit and focus on what we know is excellent and good and true. Those in attendance that night were also caught up in the power of the Spirit. When the faculty was asked to submit their sermons of the week for this publication, Bill said that he could supply what he had prepared, but what he had actually done was a moment in time. It was not written anywhere but in Bill's heart, and ours, and God's. Yes, we might have recorded and then transcribed the sermons of the week, but there is something so personal about preaching these days that not even reading the same words later in a book conveys the same experience. It also strikes the editor that the nature of preaching has changed. It is not simply to educate the listener, but to share a faithful moment. So we won't always be able to print for you the sermons we hear at PEP, and we hope you can appreciate that, too.

A second note the pertains to Dr. Brosend's opening remarks in this homily. How odd it was to have sermons at Compline, some told us. It isn't provided for in the Prayer Book. That's right, and that's usually a very good thing. But PEP is a preaching conference, and preaching is about sharing life and faith. We wanted to pray together and preach together and listen together throughout the day. We wanted to hear preaching in different moments with different styles and for different purposes. It happened twice that week, not as the cutting edge of some new liturgical movement, nor as a thumbing the nose at our tradition, but rather because we were blessed to have some wonderful preachers in our midst, and we had gathered as preachers, women and men of faith hungry to hear the Word and eager to share it. Try it sometime!

A SERMON PREACHED

at Morning Prayer on Tuesday, June 5, 2007
by the Rev. Canon Susan Harris
Rector of Christ Church in Rye, New York

Hebrews 12:-14
Luke 18:9-14

Someone asked me the other day why we use the color purple for Lent. Purple, after all, is a color associated with royalty since the days of the Roman Empire. It was the color used in the imperial court, and later, in the middle ages, continued to be a color favored by royalty and by the very wealthy. So why, when we are humbling ourselves, and taking stock of our faults, would we dress the church in purple?

It has to do with Christ's passion, and his victory on the cross, true. But what about us? We are not to be crucified, nor are we in the business of becoming kings. But here's what works for me: the moment when a man or a woman says "I'm sorry" is a moment of supreme dignity.

When a person sees the error of his ways, openly admits having done wrong, and begins to change: that is a moment worthy of a king, and worthy of the color purple.

All of us can think of times when saying "I'm sorry" has meant a great deal less than that. There are plenty of counterfeit apologies, empty apologies that we make which don't fill this bill. My favorite is the explanation. I would rather explain than apologize. I think if I explain what I did the other person will see my point of view and agree with me that what I did wasn't so bad, after all. If I'm really slick I can even make the other person feel that it's *his* fault. For example: I'm sorry I didn't have dinner ready when you got home because *blah blah blah* and besides *if I had known what time you were coming home...* You get the idea. That's an explanation, not an apology. An explanation may be warranted, but it's not the same thing as saying, "I'm sorry." It doesn't get the job done.

Another counterfeit apology is the one that starts "I'm sorry you feel that way." In other words, this is *your* problem; I never meant any harm and you were wrong to take offense. When I make this sort of apology, I've managed to avoid

admitting guilt, and insulted you in the bargain. Again, the job has not been done.

Then there's the apology too quickly offered. The offending party tosses off those words "I'm sorry" and quickly changes the subject. Parents of teenagers will recognize this one. "I'm sorry...and, why are we still talking about this?"

There's one more apology that cannot satisfy, and that is the one offered in all sincerity with tears and promises by a repeat offender who will soon go back on his word. Families of substance abusers hear this kind of apology all the time.

Those are the apologies that do not satisfy, and do not result in change. But a true apology is another story.

First, the true apology acknowledges what has gone wrong. I remember reading somewhere of an African language in which the word for "hello" can be translated, literally, "I see you." A true apology says "I see you. I see that you are hurting; I see that I am responsible. I'm sorry."

Second, a true apology – "true repentance" in the words of the Book of Common Prayer – shows genuine regret. We are truly sorry; the memory of what we have done is causing us pain; we want to do better. "*[We] are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous unto us, the burden of them is intolerable.*"

Last, a true apology opens the door for change. It may be slow, but its beginning must be immediate. The offending behavior stops or lessens right away. You look back later and say, "Wow, it's been eighteen months since he last did that thing he used to do." There's change.

This kind of true repentance is hard to come by, isn't it? Our prayer book suggests that it's a gift from God, and not something we come up with on our own. The priest giving absolution at Morning Prayer asks God to give absolution and remission of sins, *true repentance*, amendment of life, and the grace and consolation of the Holy Spirit.

True repentance, the deep turning-around kind of repentance that changes lives is a gift from God. The letter to the Hebrews, we just heard, tells us that discipline, while painful, is a sign of God's love for us. When we begin to feel those pangs of conscience it is a sign that God is at work in us, and this is a very good thing.

In the aftermath of apartheid South Africa set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission where amnesty was offered to prison guards, soldiers and officials who were willing to meet with their victims and victims families in public hearings. In Bisho, two hearings were held to bring to the fore the painful stories of a demonstration in 1992, where soldiers had opened fire on unarmed demonstrators. Twenty-eight of the protesters died as a result.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote about the hearing in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*. One officer incensed the audience by his apparent lack of compassion for the victims; another officer, a white man named Schobesberger, then stood to speak:

“ I say we are sorry. I say the burden of the Bisho massacre will be on our shoulders for the rest of our lives. We cannot wish it away. It happened. But please, I ask specifically the victims not to forget, I cannot ask this, but to forgive us, to get the soldiers back into the community, to accept them fully, to try to understand also the pressure they were under then. This is all I can do. I’m sorry, this I can say, I’m sorry.” Tutu continues, “That crowd, which had been close to lynching them, did something quite unexpected. It broke out into thunderous applause!”

Here are words that change the world: I’m sorry.

“AN UNSAFE PEOPLE”

A sermon delivered at Compline on Tuesday, June 5, 2007
by the Rev. Canon Anne E. Kitch
The Cathedral Church of the Nativity
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

1 Peter 5:8-9a RSV “Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith.”

The world is not safe. Perhaps you know this. I am conscious of this most mornings as I turn the front page of the newspaper down flat on the breakfast table hiding “Eighth-grader Gunned Down” from my nine-year old daughter. She tells me that there is no need—she hears about it anyway. Yet I am compelled to protect her; or at least try. After all, the world is not safe.

But the news is even graver—people are not safe. By this I mean not one of us is a safe person; we are dangerous to one another. There is no such thing as a safe person, or a safe priest, or a safe preacher. Welcome to reality. Welcome to fallen humanity. There is simply no escaping our capacity to hurt one another. We do it all the time. Despite best intentions, years of therapy, and countless confessions of sin, we continue to fall short of the mark when it comes to loving our neighbors as ourselves. There is nowhere, no one safe in this world. There is nowhere we can be that Satan does not prowl waiting for an opportune time. There is no one who is not prey.

It is said that Satan’s greatest victory is getting us not to believe in him. Think about how much power we give to those unconscious drives within us. Or what about those unnamed compulsions that hook us? Then there are those unexamined landscapes in our beings that cry for healing and reconciliation. I call them stumbling blocks. I name them my demons. No wonder this one line from First Peter calls to me. No wonder I am often drawn to it in Compline, wanting to pray it at night as warning and as spell to ward off attack in the vulnerable hours of sleep.

Even as child I knew the world was not safe. I had a nighttime mantra to keep nightmares at bay. In my personal ritual I would pray angels into place about me. One would be at my head, one at my feet, one on either side and one hovering over me for good measure. I imagined them spreading their wings so that I was

completely covered. If I prayed hard enough and true enough (so the rules of that ritual went) no evil could breach that holy force field. Of course it didn't work. And it did. It didn't make the world safe. It didn't re-make creation before the fall. It didn't make me perfect or impervious. It did protect me. Because I learned that I needed God. I believed that calling on the name of Christ would save me.

And here I am. I remain certain that evil cannot capture or consume us without our permission. Nevertheless the devil is always on the prowl. So I yearn to be sober and watchful because I am all too aware at times of the treacherous paths I walk. I have felt the presence of palpable evil more than once in my pastoral ministry and it is frightening. But it is not nearly as frightening as the more subtle encounters with Satan where I am the one who is dangerous to others. These are encounters that lead me to broken relationships that I somehow justify. I think they seem reasonable and acceptable. And because I have succumbed to this deception, these rifts are much more difficult to heal. It is hard to work for reconciliation when we refuse to see the brokenness to begin with.

I am afraid I give the devil opportunity in plenty in my stubborn refusal to be reconciled. Again. And again. Sometimes I even hide behind the wall of my pastoral professionalism keeping good boundaries so tight that I fail to see when they imprison me and you as well.

If unsafe is the reality, what do I do? What do we do? It comes down to response. What kind of an attitude will we have about our unsafeness? What will be our relationship to our own humanity? Will we hunker down and build a fundamentalist fortress to protect "me and mine"? Will we continue to hide the front page of the newspaper falsely assuming that we alone have the power to protect? Will we ignore evil and pretend the devil does not exist, as if our refusal to acknowledge the demons will make them go away? Or will we admit our very humanness and vulnerability?

The problem is of course that being vulnerable doesn't feel at all safe. And neither does reconciliation. It feels safer to hold on to anger. It feels safer to cut off from problem people. It feels safer to pretend it doesn't matter. We think, "I'm never going to change her so why bother?" But then, it is not others we are called to change. We are called to change ourselves.

So on a good day I choose vulnerability. I see that I fail—as a priest, as a mother, and as a friend. And I open myself farther and allow Christ in. It is Christ,

after all, who is the only one with a good track record of combating Satan and winning. “Resist,” the writer of First Peter says. Resist Satan, firm in your faith. This faith is the faith of our baptism. The language is right there in our prayer book:

Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness which rebel against God?

Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

Yes. Yes, I do. Yes, I renounce them. And one thing more. I turn to Christ.

We are unsafe people; and we are unsafe together. That is why we put our whole trust in the grace and love of Christ. Christ who alone can save us. And does.

“FLESH MADE WORD”

The Rev. Dr. John A. Dally
 Professor of Christian Communication
 Seabury-Western Theological Seminary

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory,
 the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. *John 1:14*

As in clear nights of full moon Trivia smiles among the eternal nymphs that deck the sky through all its depths, I saw, above thousands of lamps, a Sun which kindled each one of them as ours does the sights we see above, and, through the living light, the shining substance showed so bright in my eyes that they could not bear it. Dante, *Paradiso* XXIII:25-33, translated John D. Sinclair

Dante read alongside the bible, out loud and in church! My UCC friends get to do this kind of stuff all the time; I rarely do. But what does it mean? Does placing these two readings side by side imply some kind of claim about their relative sacredness? Does reading the words of a 14th Century Italian poet alongside of words revered for centuries as “Word of God” elevate Dante to the level of scripture? Or does reading the Bible alongside the words of a 14th Century Italian poet reduce the words of scripture to the level of religious poetry? Is there more than one definition of a sacred text?

Certainly the 23^d Canto of *Paradiso* offers a helpful gloss on the line from the Gospel of John. In this canto Dante and Beatrice have reached the eighth circle of heaven, very near its apex, and Dante is about to witness the coronation of the Virgin, apparently a daily event in this part of paradise. (“Today at 3:00 PM: Coronation of the Virgin. Ticket holders to the left, will-call to the right; last minute cast substitutions may be announced by the management.”) To behold this sight Dante is instructed by Beatrice to lift his eyes, and, as he does so, he catches his first glimpse of the glorified body of Jesus, descending from the Empyrean and surrounded by the hosts of the Church Triumphant. Dante has heard of the body of Jesus since he was a child; he has read about the body of Jesus in the pages of the Christian scriptures; but now he sees the body of Jesus with his own eyes, and they cannot bear the sight: *E per la viva luce* (“And through the living light”) *trasparea la lucente sustanza* (“the shining substance penetrated”) *tanto chiara nel viso mio* (“so brightly upon my sight”) *che non lo sostenea* (“that I could not bear it”).

Historically, the Christian faith has made a great deal of the body of Jesus: “the Word made flesh” is a phrase asserted and interpreted to the point of utter banality. Many of the world’s religions make the claim: “God gave us these texts to read.” Only Christianity says: “God gave us this *flesh* to read.” Yet time and again this religion of the flesh has shown a marked preference for the Word as text and an inability to read flesh as Word, even when that Word made flesh cries out for interpretation. Indeed, time and again, the church has used words to triumph *over* flesh.

Augustine’s *De correctione Donatistarum* (On the Correction of the Donatists) was the first Christian argument for the use of force against those who misinterpret, or interpret differently, the texts which define the Christian faith. “Let those in the highways and hedges be compelled to come in,” Augustine wrote, quoting Luke’s version of the Parable of the Wedding Feast. Compelled at the point of the Catholic emperor’s sword, if need be. “Many must be recalled to their Lord by the stripes of temporal scourging, like evil slaves, and in some degree like good-for-nothing fugitives.” Augustine wrote the words, and the Donatists felt the no longer metaphorical consequences in their flesh.

Eight hundred and fifty years later the papal bull *Ad extirpanda* was promulgated, specifically invoking the foundation of Augustine’s writings against the Donatists and authorizing for the first time the torture of people arrested by the Holy Office of Inquisition; the bull was promulgated by a pope who had taken for himself the name of Innocent.

In 1538 Hugh Latimer, bishop of Worcester, preached a sermon of condemnation while John Forest, Catherine of Aragon’s confessor, was hanged on chains over a blazing fire and roasted to death by order of Thomas Cranmer, archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the Protestant reformation in England. Latimer’s text was the one we heard from Hebrews yesterday morning: “The Lord disciplines those whom he loves.” (12:6) Knowing Forest’s devotion to Our Lady of Walsingham, the bishops brought in a statue of her from a church in Wales to serve as the principal log for the fire.

Because the words of each of these Christian thinkers were committed to paper, we can read Augustine’s treatise, or Innocent’s bull, or Latimer’s sermon: they have outlasted the flesh their words tortured and destroyed. The texts of flesh have proved ephemeral, while texts of pen and ink have lasted centuries.

Today religion is writing new sacred texts on the flesh of men, women

and children at an alarming rate, texts which you and I have not been trained to read as thoroughly as we have been trained in the reading of texts of pen and ink.

The war crimes trials which continue to this day in The Hague have brought the atrocities of the Balkan Wars of the 90s to our attention once again and reveal some of these new religious texts. How many women in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo were systematically raped during those wars? 20,000, 50,000, 100,000? How many gang-raped Muslim women had crosses cut in their exhausted flesh by their Christian attackers when the ordeal was over? We may never know for sure, because what the rapists wrote on these women's bodies has remained largely untranscribed into the ink-on-paper testimony recognized by courts of law.

About a week and a half ago Ena Salah, a 9-year old Palestinian girl, was sleeping in the bedroom of her family's crowded apartment in the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in Lebanon, under siege by the Israeli army. A burst of shrapnel took her left eye and arm. The rescue workers who found her reported that her blood had been sprayed across the open pages of a Quran near her bed. How can we interpret such a scene? Where is the sacred text, and what does it mean?

And Daniel Pearl, the assassinated reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*: a man of words, a man who believed passionately in the power of words to make a difference in the lives of people. His last words were not of his own choosing, but they have taken on a weird eternity in cyberspace because they were captured on video. His assassins forced him to say "I am a Jew, the son of a Jew" before they slit his neck and cut off his head. At least Pilate wrote it down for Jesus and put it over his dying body: IESUS NAZARENUS REX IUDAEORUM.

We can neither point an accusing finger at this violence nor wring our hands in dismay about it until we learn about and acknowledge our complicity in the history that has led us to this moment. It is no longer enough for us to engage in form, source, and redaction criticism of ancient texts; we must become students as well of the pain and suffering these texts have been used to inflict on countless human beings through history. It will not do to see the speck in our Muslim or Israeli brother's eye while we ignore the log in our own. But such study will require new skills of us. If we can read religious ideas written on paper, can we read them as well when they are written on flesh?

The flesh Dante saw transfigured in the eighth circle of heaven was no less mistreated than any of the examples I've cited this morning. The body of Jesus

was spat upon, beaten, flogged, and ripped by nails; the flesh Dante saw in the eighth circle of heaven was that of a man executed as a terrorist; now, Dante says, it shines so brightly with transfigured light he cannot bear it.

If there is even the remotest possibility that Dante's gloss on John's confession reveals a truth about the destiny of human flesh — that its destiny is to display the radiance of God, to become the *lucente sustanza* it was created to become — should we not become students of it even now? Is it not time to privilege the sacred text of a nine year old's mangled body over anything on paper? To ask what it means for Muslim women to carry cross-shaped scars on their body even as we sit in this chapel? Will we not read the paper texts all the more deeply for reversing our priorities?

To see the transfigured destiny of flesh now, in its abasement, is to enter the door to an entire new library of sacred texts. To be able to read such texts, to interpret them, to exegete them, is to learn to say: "Here is God: here in this raped and beaten body, this wounded flesh, pierced, like that of Jesus, for the sake of somebody's idea of religion."

These texts were read immediately after the sermon:

"All scripture is written by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, and for training in righteousness." (*II Timothy 3:16*)

"Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say 'We see,' your sin remains.'" (*John 9:39-41*)

A SERMON PREACHED

at Noonday Prayers on Wednesday, June 6, 2007
by the Rev. Dr. William Hethcock
Professor of Homiletics, Emeritus
The School of Theology, University of the South
Sewanee, Tennessee

John 9:1-41

FOCUS SENTENCE: When you and I are ready to have our blindness healed and to see the light, Jesus is ready too.

I

Jesus is strolling along with his disciples. We can see Jesus out front leading the group and talking. They don't seem to be in a hurry.

Look there, over on the side of the road, a blind man begging. They're all stopping and having a discussion about him almost as if he were not within easy earshot. "Uh oh, Jesus," the disciples remark. "Somebody sinned here. Who was it, Jesus?" Jesus has to explain to everyone again that the bit about the sin of the parents being visited upon their children is a false theology. Instead, the man has come to them so that Jesus might show the works of God through him.

II

Then Jesus goes off on what sounds like a tangent. He talks yet again about light. John has certainly kept us aware in his writing that light is a very important subject for Jesus. John calls Jesus himself "the light." "The light shines in the darkness," John tells us, "and the darkness did not overcome it." And Jesus has just said not long before this moment on the road, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Now, here with all these people and the blind man, Jesus says it again, "I am the light of the world." Do you suppose that Jesus' choosing this moment to talk again about light is occasioned by the presence of this blind man who has lived his life in darkness?

Jesus spits on the ground and makes some mud there in the dusty road where his spittle lands. Then Jesus, paying no attention that this is the Sabbath, spreads the mud made with his own saliva on the eyes of this man whom he knows has never in his life been able to see. And Jesus says to him, “Man, go to the Siloam pool and wash this stuff off your eyes.” The man is compliant. “Whatever,” he says. And he goes and washes himself and wow—he returns to Jesus able to see!

III

Now, this beggar, this man born blind, becomes an instant celebrity. All his neighbors when they see him are amazed and curious. “Is this the same person who just yesterday was sitting and begging by the side of the road? Look at him now. He was blind yesterday, but today he can see.” Others say, “No, this is not the same guy. The blind man must have a twin brother. This isn’t the blind man we saw yesterday.” And so the blind man speaks up and says, “Well, the truth of the matter is that I am he.”

“Well, tell us, Man. How could your blind eyes suddenly be opened?” And the man tells them the whole story about Jesus, the spittle, the mud, his bath at the Siloam pool, and his seeing for the first time in his life.

Now his friends and neighbors bring the man before the Pharisees. Listen to the logic of their argument. Since Jesus did this thing, giving sight to the man, on the Sabbath, he could not be “from God.” Therefore, Jesus is clearly a sinner, so it couldn’t be possible that Jesus gave sight to this man after all. The fact that the man can see is not acceptable evidence. So they argue. They ask the man whose eyes have been opened, “What do you think about this man who brought you to see?” And the man himself answered rather boldly, “He is a prophet.”

Next they interrogate the man’s parents. “Well,” the parents answer, “to be sure this is indeed our son, and he was as you know really born blind, but we like our seats in the synagogue so much that we aren’t going to put them at risk. So, we have nothing to say about the matter. Ask our son himself. He’s old enough to answer you.”

By the time this young man, who by now is beginning to see the situation rather well, is drilled about it all again, he has become quite bold. He corrects the religious leaders’ logic. “It goes like this,” he teaches them. “I’m surprised at all you people. We don’t know where this man comes from, but we do know he

opened my eyes. If he were not from God, he couldn't do such a thing. So, folks, since never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind, we know this man is truly from God." For that bit of comeuppance, they throw the man out of the synagogue.

When Jesus hears that the man has been expelled from the synagogue, he goes looking for him. And when he finds him, he asks him this searching question: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" And the man who so recently had lived in darkness asked him, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus answers him, "You are looking at him with your own brand new eyes. The one speaking with you is he." And the blind man with the brand new sight says to Jesus, "Lord, I believe." And he worships him.

IV

What John is telling us in this story is a shocker to us. Are you ready for this? John is telling us that you and I are blind. That's right. John says that you and I can't see for sour apples. And he is telling us that we were born that way. You and I can't see for sour apples.

The Pharisees show us what our problem is like. They ask Jesus, "Surely we are not blind? Are we?" John's answer is, "Yes." In other words, John is telling us that it is possible to be blind and not know it. Amazing. There are the trees and the flowers. There are the faces of our family and our friends. We see them, don't we? There is our seminary, and there are our professors and our classmates. There are those advertisements for vestments, and the pictures of handsome men and women in clergy shirts and colorful stoles. We can see all that. We're almost there. What we're planning and working for is just around the corner. And yet, says John the Evangelist, it's possible for us to be blind, he says, and not even know it. How can that be? What are we missing?

I love the blind man, because I'm like him. There is something going on here that is bigger than I am, and I'm afraid I'm not seeing it. Is it just that, or is it that I'm glad I'm not seeing it? There is an awful lot going on in my life—and I'll bet in yours as well—so much that seeing it all is overwhelming. And there is an awful lot going on in the world, more than I care to look at. This priest role, indeed this Christian role, is glamorous and beautiful until our blindness is healed, and then it becomes challenging, stretching, and often even painful and ugly.

It's all out there in front of us. There are people in this room who will be wearing a clerical collar when social security runs out. You'll be dressed up ready for priesthood when the oceans move further over our shores. You'll be on the

job when someone throws a nuclear weapon at someone else, or when one of them hits us. You'll be a priest when a serious disease—either at the fault of human-kind or by the evolution of some presently harmless virus—gets out of control. You'll be there in a clerical collar serving that congregation you long for when people die, when people's money runs out, when children suffer needlessly, when men and women decide that God has forgotten us and tell you so, or when they decide that there is no God at all, and live in despair. Those are the times when our blindness is convenient.

That blind man may have been smarter if he had said, "Sure Jesus. I'll wash," and then washed the mud off his eyes in the bathroom sink instead and skipped the pool at Siloam. He could go on begging by the roadside and leave the world to others. Life might be easier for him.

But no. He was glad to see. And he had courage enough to take the world on about it. "I don't know all the answers you want," he said to the religious leaders, "but one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." And then, he said to Jesus, "Tell me where this Son of Man is so that I may believe in him." The man is still blind, you know. The moment of his healing was not at the Siloam pool alone. It's about to happen again. Listen. Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." Suddenly he saw the light and said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. And the new light filled him to overflowing.

V

What Jesus is showing to those folks with him strolling along the road, and to the church for whom John is writing, and to you and me here at this midday is this: "If you want to be any good to me," says Jesus, "you have to be able to see. You have to be willing to see. When you are ready to be healed, I'll give you your sight."

Some will say, "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind." Nonsense! You and I know better than that. Jesus does it every day. And we know this as well. There are brand new eyes in store for us.

When you and I are ready to have our blindness healed and to see the light, Jesus is ready too.

A SERMON PREACHED

at Morning Prayers on Thursday, June 7, 2007
by the Rev. Dr. Deborah Meister
Rector, Christ Church in New Brunswick, New Jersey

Psalm 85; Genesis 32:24-30, 33:4, 8-10
Philippians 3:4b-15

In July of 1917, at the height of the First World War, a highly decorated officer in the British Army published the following statement in the *London Times*:

I am making this statement as an act of willful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.

I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defense and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends, which I believe to be evil and unjust.

I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practiced on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.

S.Sassoon

For his act of moral courage, Sassoon was committed to a mental hospital.

How do we find the strength to stop the violence that rages around us? Where do we find sufficient courage to wage reconciliation? How do we rid ourselves of “the callous complacency” which shields us from seeing the “agonies which [we] do not share”? Can we learn, with Paul, to “count everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as [our] Lord” (Phil 3:8)? These questions haunt me, for, in an age of international violence and ecclesiastical strife, they are the questions which are central to the vocation of every Christian.

The first murder in our holy book takes place between two brothers. It haunts the text, overshadows all the later stories of feuding kindred and broken trust. Will this one, too, end in bloodshed? Is there another path? “I am a soldier,” wrote Sassoon, “convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers.” How do we finally come to believe, deep in our bones, that we are no better than our brother?

Jacob learns in the dark watches of the night, those terrifying hours when we must put aside all our toys – our wealth and our friends, our collars and our robes – and wrestle naked with whatever stranger God sends into our dreams. The night before he is to return home, to see again, after fourteen years of exile, the brother he had wronged, Jacob lies alone by a river. And in the night, a man appears, and wrestles with him until daybreak. And Jacob is injured in the hip, but still he clings to the man in a grip as intimate as love, gasping, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” And so the man blesses him, not by wishing him good, as his father had done, but by naming him truly: “You are Israel, the one who strives with God.” Out of their common encounter, the man reveals to Jacob the truth about himself.

And Jacob cries out, “What is your name?” What is your name? Are you Esau? Are you Cain, come to haunt me with the damage I may yet do? Are you God or angel, demon or friend? Why do you seem to wear my face? But the man replies, “Why is it that you ask my name?” Traditionally, this has been understood as the reticence with which we reverence the Name of God. But, perhaps, the man meant something else entirely. Perhaps the man’s name is not relevant. Jacob’s task was to learn to claim the name of brother, with all its ambivalence of injury and blessing, to accept that struggle can separate us from no man. Why do you ask my name? Why do you not simply accept that I am? Does not our very struggle tell you more about me and about you than a label ever can?

My friends, those people, the ones who goad us and prick us and drive us to rage or to despair, they are the very souls for whom Christ was willing to lay down his life. They are still our brothers through his blood. That angry conserva-

tive who is thinking of leaving the Church, that gay man who is devastated that you will not bless his union, that senior warden who castigated you because you preached about Iraq and dragged politics into what she sees as the pure realm of faith, that snotty teenager who listened to your sermon last week – and sniggered – those people are the most precious things in all of God’s creation, the souls for which he shattered death, and he has given them into our hands, placed them there like so many baby birds, for us to crush them, or maim them, or nourish them in faith and love and hope, until they gain strength to fly.

At the end of several months in the mental hospital, Siegfried Sassoon returned to the front lines. He had not renounced his conviction that the violence was wrong, but had come to realize that he was inextricably bound to his fellow-soldiers, unable to know peace while they were still being torn apart. He wrote,

When I’m asleep, dreaming and lulled and warm, ——
They come, the homeless ones, the noiseless dead. While the dim
charging breakers of the storm Bellow and drone and rumble
overhead, Out of the gloom they gather about my bed. They
whisper to my heart; their thoughts are mine. “Why are you here
with all your watches ended? From Ypres to Frise we sought you
in the Line.” In bitter safety I awake, unfriended; And while the
dawn begins with slashing rain I think of the Battalion in the mud.
“When are you going out to them again? Are they not still your
brothers through our blood?” (“Sick Leave”)

My brothers and sisters, we, too, are bound by blood to all those who are unable to find a safety or peace, within or outside the church. They are our brothers and sisters through the blood of Christ, who did not step down from the cross, but who willingly endured the death and shame which are our common lot, in order that nothing might separate him from his creation again. And do we, we who have the temerity to speak in his name, do we dare to stand in the shadow of that priceless gift and claim that we have the right to stand apart from one another?

Near the end of all his struggles, Jacob crosses the river, to see again his brother, to make amends and to accept whatever punishment Esau chooses to enact. But Esau runs to meet the prodigal, throws his arms around his neck and kisses him, and they wept. Years earlier, when Esau learned that Jacob has stolen his blessing, he cried out, “Have you only one blessing, Father? Bless me, me also, father!’ And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.” (Gen 27:38) But Isaac did learn

another blessing: he set Esau free from his hatred for his brother.

The mystery of the angel is that for Jacob, for Esau, for all of us, there is only one choice: human beings were made to struggle; we know ourselves only in knowing one another. We can burn in fires of hatred, or we can burn in fires of love, but burn we will. For

Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire. [Eliot, Little Gidding]

Is Christ so poor that he has but one blessing? Can we not learn to look upon the face of our enemy and see that it is the face of God?

“MODESTY IN RECONCILIATION”

The Reverend Michael W. Goldberg, Rector
St. Augustine of Canterbury Episcopal Church
Vero Beach, Florida

“Therefore brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman,
but of the free woman.” *Galatians 4:31*

I had the privilege to be on pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the winter of 1999. It was captivating, emotional, exhausting, and yes; I even brought back the flu, which laid me up for more than a week, upon my return.

While going through the Church of the Nativity, in Bethlehem, we were led by our Sabra Israeli guide, down to the grotto, where Christians for centuries have revered the birthplace of Jesus. As we were winding our way down to the grotto, an Orthodox nun came flying by our party, brushing by our guide, and practically knocking her onto the narrow staircase leading downward. Our guide, trying to remain cordial in the face of this apparent brushback, tried to explain to the nun that if she had only asked, we would have gladly moved away to permit her access to the stairway down. The nun made a disparaging remark about “filthy Jews” polluting the sacred space of Our Lord, or words to that effect.

The nun proceeded to rush headlong onto the marble flooring, where the Silver Star radiates around the place where Jesus was laid after His birth. She stooped down, on all fours, and kissed the marble floor. She then turned and rushed by our guide, who caused the nun to pause for a moment, as she reminded her, that where she had just laid her lips, another “filthy Jew,” had also be laid. Gasps, again, were heard from the group, as we witnessed this give and take, in this shrine, in this sacred place, where Christians have gathered for prayer and worship for centuries; and where sadly, racial tensions continue to run hot to this very hour.

To say that I had some special interest in this discussion would be to put the matter mildly. My father is Jewish; half my family remains in the tradition of Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Miriam, well you know the family as well as I do.

So it is with interest that when I read the scriptures, I read with the eyes of someone who embraces two traditions, each and every time I open the Bible. The

contentious story of Hagar/Ishmael and Sarah/Isaac, as found in Genesis, and again repeated by St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians, opens for us an opportunity to once again see for ourselves the power of racial prejudice, jealousy, fear, and maybe, just maybe, the hope for reconciliation in the freedom we share in Christ.

St. Paul chooses this story of the slave woman versus the free woman to allow us to see that in Christ, we are given the chance to love in a way that allows us to be open to those who still have not heard the comforting word of the One, who brings new life and hope.

William Barclay in his commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians explains the fact that our text is interpreted on four levels: “Peshat, which was the simple meaning. (2) Remaz, which is the suggested meaning. (3) Derush, which is the meaning evolved and deduced by investigation. (4) Sod, which was the allegorical meaning. The first letters of these four words —P R D S—are consonants for the word Paradise.” When someone reached all four levels of the meaning of a text, the believer reached the level and joy of paradise in the word.¹

It was apparent to those of us in the group at the Bethlehem grotto, that our friendly nun, was no where near paradise—but maybe still stuck on Peshat—the literal meaning of the text that causes us to remain at enmity with those who may have differing opinions than we.

The complexity of this biblical text, and many texts that are eisegited in this way is that it supports a model of biblical interpretation which seeks to force people into belief, rather than to allow the scripture to be opened, such as a flower might open its petals. Our nun was tied to the law, and that was it, cased closed! Anyone who was not of the “right belief,” that is, our Israeli guide, could not find any sense of salvation or love in the kingdom. Paul rebukes this point of view, as he carefully keeps a sense of modesty before God and His word for His people.

By rejecting the legalism of merely living by every jot and tittle of the law, Paul points us into the new direction of the child born of the promise—born of grace. This sense of grace is God’s “next step” in seeking reconciliation with His people and the people with each other. Our freedom is in living into God’s self-giving, self-sacrificing love, for Paul that is, agape.

Bruce Feiler, in his book, *Abraham: a Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, allows for the importance of modesty before God and the scripture. Feiler was discussing his interpretations of God’s word with a Greek Orthodox bishop,

a Muslim imam, and an Orthodox rabbi. I found the rabbi the most interesting of the three. When asked what he feared the most, living in the heart of Jerusalem, teaching his students, working in his jewelry shop, he remarked he feared those who were not humbled by the word. The rabbi said, "If you ask me, it's a question of modesty...Why do religious people act the way they act? It's because of a lack of modesty. It's what happened in Jerusalem with Christian cults planning to blow up the Temple Mount to make way for the messiah. It's what happened in Israel with the murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin after he made peace with the Palestinians. Some people read the text and suffer from lack of modesty. They really believe they had all the answers...I know that someone else will have more insights than I will." ²

It was lack of modesty that caused Hagar to taunt Sarah in her barrenness; it was lack of modesty that caused Sarah, once she received the child of the promise, Isaac, to demand that the slave woman and her son, Abraham's first-born, if you will, be put out of the family compound to fend for themselves, and die; it was lack of modesty for that nun, to not only push us aside, but to insult us—all of us on a pilgrimage in that land that is called "holy."

In writing to the Church in Galatia, and to us who gather this evening, Paul announces the gift of grace which is found in the reconciling love of the God who reaches out to all people. While acknowledging that we are sons and daughters of the free woman, he is offering us, not out of sense of triumphalism, but out of true modesty the story of God's call to us, who are just beginning to learn and understand His word. By living into agape, we are allowing reconciliation to be a modicum of living which reaches and embraces, not excludes and marginalizes. God made provision for Hagar and Ishmael. Ishmael stood at the grave of his father, upon Abraham's burial, as a sign of respect and maybe, even forgiveness, as he sought to understand the depths of his father's life, in his living in modesty, before the God who created him.

No, reconciliation comes to us, not in some easily wrapped package of "thou shall's," and "thou shalt not's," but rather in the modest understanding that God's truth is large enough to accommodate diverse opinions as we all continue to work out our sense of God's promise to each of us. Now I know that is the most expansive of generalities, but I would go back to a talk I had heard within the last year, when Rabbi Harold Kushner came to our town of Vero Beach, to promote his latest book. After his set remarks, the usual questions followed. The first questioner wanted to know if the good rabbi had accepted Jesus "as his Lord and Savior." The crowd tittered uneasily, but the good Rabbi had heard this

question before, and he said, “I am most indebted to those early followers of Jesus of Nazareth. For were it not for them, the beauty and love of God’s Torah, would not have been spread throughout the known world, and our way of living would be that much poorer because of it.”

The applause was thunderous! A potentially difficult situation was turned into a graced-filled moment, where God’s people all were able to take away some of the peace of God which passes all understanding. I still reflect on those opening words from Melville’s, *Moby Dick*, the survivor of the attack by the white whale explains, “Call me Ishmael.” In seeking to explain the horror of the sinking of his ship, the loss of his friends, the demonic attitude of the captain, Ishmael seeks, in all modesty, to reconcile his life with One who is simply greater than anything he had ever experienced. Pray that as we continue our course in faith, that we might be healers and reconcilers for this broken and hurting world. AMEN.

¹ Barkley, William. *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954) p. 44.

² Feiler, Bruce. *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York: William Morrow, 2002) p. 134.

“A Tale of Two Widows”

The Rev. Lucinda Laird
Rector of St. Matthew’s Church
Louisville, Kentucky

1 Kings 17:17-24

Luke 7:11-17

A tale of two widows.

A tale of two widows and their sons, their only sons, sons who die and are restored to life by the grace and power of God.

This will be hard for some to hear.

It will be hard for Sarah. How do I look Sarah in the eye? I presided at the funeral of her husband, but first I presided at the funeral of their 25 year old son, their only son. The church was packed as it always is when someone that young dies. *O, my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!* I could not help but hear these verses in my mind, and I used them in my sermon; but I could not bear to use the other Biblical image that haunted me: I had seen in Sarah’s face the image of Mary at the foot of the cross. How will Sarah hear these readings? What good news can I preach to her?

It will be hard for Jack, whose daughter died of an overdose 3 days before her 20th birthday. It will be hard for Doug and Jane, whose 13 year old daughter committed suicide. And how do I reach out to Peggy, whose small son died 4 years ago, and whose husband is now gravely ill? Peggy tells me that she and God are no longer on speaking terms - but she keeps coming to church. What does Peggy care that these two women had their sons given back to them?

Luke tells us, *Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her he had compassion for her...*

When the Lord saw her he had compassion for her... I have always loved that line. I can picture Jesus standing there, hot and dusty from his journey, looking at the crowd coming through the gate, seeing the widow, realizing what had happened, understanding that all she had was lost. And he had compassion. Something inside of him moved, broke; he suffered with her. And he acted, he came forward, he told the young man to get up. *Young man, I say to you, rise! Get up! This will not do! This cannot be! Get up, I say, and return to your mother.*

The widow of Zarephath acted for herself. I can't see the widow of Nain, but I can see this woman. She has trusted Elijah. She has offered him hospitality, offered him all that she has in the midst of a famine, and believed him when he told her that his God, the God of Israel, would provide. And God did provide. But then: *After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!"*

She's mad. She's stunned and bewildered and aching and furious. And she speaks to Elijah - no, I am sure she shouted, she yelled. Why? Just tell me why! You and your God, you who can keep that jar of meal and jug of oil filled - that's a nice trick all right, but what do I care? Why did you ever turn up? My son, my only son is dead and you and your God aren't worth anything as far as I am concerned. You should have left us to die in the famine in the first place.

She says something else, too. Did you notice? Isn't this a bit odd: *you have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son.* Sin? What sin? Does she do as I do, as we all do, in times of anguish and terror, and ask God, "What did I do to deserve this? Are you punishing me? What have I done???" all the while with that sense of guilt and shame, knowing that we have done so badly at loving God and neighbor, and feeling in some awful way that perhaps we do deserve this. It's usually unspoken, but this woman names it, even as she spits out her grief and anger at Elijah.

Does Sarah ask herself if it was her sin, her failures that led to the death of her son? Had she cared for him better, loved him more, spent more time... would this have happened? Does Jack ask himself the same about his daughter? Do Doug and Jane wrestle in the night with the terrible question: was this our fault? Does Peggy scream out at God, "what have I done?" before she cuts off communication?

Elijah acted. He took the boy to his own room, cried out to God, and in a desperate intimacy stretched himself upon the child three times. *And the life of the child came into him again and he revived. . . . and Elijah gave him to his mother.*

Elijah gave him to his mother. Jesus gave the young man in Nain to his mother. They restored life, and returned these two people to community, and to the mothers who loved and needed them.

And why not me, says Sarah? And me, say Jack and Doug and Jane and Peggy? Why not us?

The truth is, Jesus says earlier in Luke, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, . . . yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. He gets run out of town for that, too.

What do I say? I cannot say anything to Sarah and Jack and Doug and Jane and Peggy. I cannot give them an explanation. I cannot fix it. Only God can say something to them.

Many years ago I went up before the Commission on Ministry in the Diocese of New York as an aspirant for Holy Orders. To say I was nervous and anxious is putting it mildly. I was frantic to figure out what to say and do, I was scared they'd reject me, and I was probably equally scared they'd accept me.

Twenty of us aspirants were there that weekend. The most intense part of the weekend was the four-on-one interview each of us had with COM members. We were scheduled in three shifts, and I was scheduled for the third, which served to increase my anxiety by the moment. I remember how those of us in the third shift crowded around the ones who came out after the first. How'd did it go? What did they say? What did they ask? Tell us!

One young man said, "It was pretty intense. The strangest question I got was from a priest who said, "Tell me what you would do in this situation. Your senior warden's 4 year old son has been run over and killed by a drunk driver. What do you do? What do you say?"

Well, we demanded: What did you answer?

"I told them that no matter what, I would remain in control. I wouldn't

get upset. I'd stay calm. I'd remind the parents that God is always in charge, and God has a plan."

I remember thinking that I didn't know much of anything about how to react, how to reach out to people in such a terrible situation, but surely, surely that answer was not right.

Years later, after I'd been ordained (and the young man disappeared to do something else entirely), I realized who the priest was who had asked the question. It had been a crisis he had dealt with only a few months previously. So I asked him, "What did you do?" He answered, "I prayed as hard as I've ever prayed. Then I went to the senior warden's house, and I rang the doorbell. He opened the door and I burst into tears."

He was a wonderful priest.

Weep with them that weep...

I have wept with Sarah and Jack and Peggy and Doug and Jane. Our community has wept with them. They have brought their tears into church; I have seen them at the altar rail as they raise their hands for communion.

But they do raise their hands for communion. They do receive Christ. And Christ acts in them.

Give any one of them a choice and they would ask for their children back in a nanosecond. But Christ acts in them.

They do not forget. But they journey with us with and to and into Christ. And we learn with them, and again and again, that it is *through the grave and gate of death that we pass with Christ to our joyful resurrection*. Not around – through. Much as we might prefer over or under or around: through.

They would like restoration. Wouldn't we all? But that is not the promise. The promise is resurrection, new life, fuller life, in Christ. The promise is rising to new life in and with Christ. The promise, finally, is not the restoration of Lazarus, or the son of the widow of Nain, or the child of the widow of Zarephath. The promise is resurrection in Christ.

God acted then and God acts now. Our job is not to fix or explain or

defend. Our job is to be what Henri Nouwen called remembrancers of Christ.

Here he is! Here he is!

Remembrancers that God loved us enough to enter into the pain of abandonment and death, AND the pain of a parent who loses a child. God is with us, no matter in what dark place we find ourselves.

Reminders that God acted and acts and will act with terrible intimacy. That the One who breathed us into being loves us into eternity.

Here is good news indeed.

We weep with them and walk with them into the love of God.

(NOTE: The names used here are fictitious. The people are very real.)

“A SERMON PREACHED”

by Gary Butterworth
The School of Theology, University of the South

Proper 6 Book of Common Prayer
2 Samuel 11.26-12.10, 13-15
Galatians 2.11-21
Luke 7.36-50

As Christians, are we Peacemakers? Or put another way, as Christians and Episcopalians are we reconcilers or dividers? It is not a question with an easy answer, yet it is one, that no doubt is important, and one I would like all of us to contemplate.

I was moved by a story I read recently, the story said that there is a small doll dressed in a orange and blue kimono that sits in a display case at an intermediate school on Bainbridge Island off the coast of Puget Sound. The doll is old, it is worn, but something about its appearance assures you that it has been loved and that it has many stories to tell. Its warm black oriental eyes stare out at the passers by, and if it could talk it would have much to say about reconciliation in this broken world, it seemed to be saying always look forward, not back.

The doll belonged to Kazuko Kay Nakao, an American born Japanese who by nothing more than her heritage, was rounded up along with her mother and father, Sonoji Sakai, and left their prosperous strawberry farm along with more than 225 Bainbridge Island Japanese Americans and placed in what the government called “internment camps” but what in reality were just a little bit better than prison camps.

You may know that over 120,000 Japanese were taken from their homes in early 1942 and placed in internment camps to cut down the possibility that Japanese spies could operate within the United States. Paper notices appeared on telephone poles around Bainbridge Island about the same time white and yellow blossoms appeared on the Sakai’s strawberry plants. The notices read, “Instructions to all Japanese living on Bainbridge Island: All Japanese persons, both alien and non-alien, will be evacuated from this area by twelve noon, March 30, 1942.” A few weeks before the notices were posted, FBI agents barged into the Sakai’s

house accusing them of being spies. When the men left Sonoji instructed his family to round up everything Japanese and he burned it all. Could they ever feel safe again? It did not matter that they had been living in the United States since 1918 or that he had cashed in life insurance policies to buy war bonds. No, the soldiers came, with loaded weapons and bayonets no less, families and businesses were destroyed and dreams were shattered.

Sakai's family arrived on the alkali plains of California's dry Owen Valley at a tar papered assemblage of hastily built military styled barracks called Camp Manzanar. Blowing sand found its way into their teeth, ears, and mouth. Guards raked searchlights past their barracks at night. Eventually they were moved to Camp Minidoka in Idaho where it wasn't so hot. They were given an 16 x 20 room with army cots, hanging blanket partitions and an oil burning stove which could not keep up with the minus 20 degree winters. This stood in stark contrast to their 6 room house on Bainbridge Island. Kazuko says she couldn't accept that they were in prison, "My parents were kind, honest people."

In today's reading from Second Samuel we hear Nathan condemning David about David's ruthless and selfish actions surrounding Bathsheba's husband Uriah the Hittite. David had sent Uriah to the front lines so that he would be killed and David would be able to take Bathsheba as his own. David was struck when Nathan condemned him and responded, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die." David had been forgiven, his act, although wrong, fell on a loving God and David was able to take the steps necessary to reconcile with God.

One definition of reconciliation literally means to walk together again, reconciliation allows us to learn of our continuing need for forgiveness, recommitment, and the intensity of our first love in the practice of our baptismal promises. We are called to love one another to be humble and to love our God. I refer to Matthew and the Great Commandment or as I prefer the Love Commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

Reconciliation is a Christian's moral choice to a nonviolent life. Although it stands in stark contrast to our "Look out for number one" world, it is what we have been called to do through our baptism. As God forgave David, so we also forgive, reconciling the love and sacrifice that Christ gave for us to others, It is our

lifeline to the community, to the spirit of God, to Jesus in the father's mercy.

In John's Gospel, after Jesus' death, Simon Peter has the chance to start over again, Jesus walks with him on the beach and in response to Jesus' question, three times, "Do you Love Me?" Peter responds with I Love You each time. I read the other day that Jesus might have been musing to himself, "Has Simon forgotten his actions of a few days ago, would he rather me be asking him about his three betrayals?" No, Jesus loves Peter and Peter is able to believe again, believe in Jesus and the love and forgiveness that he stands for. Jesus responds "feed my lambs, feed my sheep." Peter is told to share Jesus' forgiveness with all his community and those who may betray him in the future.

The war soon ended and the internment camps closed just as hastily as they had been opened. The Sakai's return to Bainbridge Island after the war went fairly smooth. Friends were happy to see them back, the foreman of the farm had kept the farm running. The only problem was the squatter who would not leave their house. Sonoji, not one to get even, depressed or hold a grudge, told his family that they would move into the basement and that their first meal would be fish and pickled daikon. Supposedly pickled daikon smells like Limburger cheese and soon the aroma was rising through the floorboards. You know what happened next, the squatter soon moved out.

The small Japanese doll with it's orange and blue kimono stares out at Kazuko from a suitcase she has just opened that she had left behind. She had forgotten that it was hidden away on that fateful night when her father had gathered all their Japanese belongings and set fire to them. She was so glad to see it as it had been a gift from her grandmother who had died when the atom bomb fell on Hiroshima.

Life eventually got back to normal for the Sakai's and after two years men from the local school district came and asked Sonoji to sell some of his land so they could build a new school. Kazuko wondered what her father would do? After a few days of thinking Sonoji told the family that he would sell and shocked them further when he decided that he would sell for what he had paid for the land, not what it was currently worth. He did this because, in spite of what had happened to his family, Sonoji believed that they must be good citizens, Kazuko recalls her fathers words, "no matter what happened,... we must contribute to our community and look forward, not back."

Time passed and Sonoji Sakai died. Recently Kazuko was shocked when she opened a newspaper to see that the Bainbridge Island School District had selected her father's name "Sakai" as the name of the new 5th and 6th grade intermediate school. When she read this (and I quote) "I thought of my father coming to America, working hard, enduring humiliation in camps and finally offering generosity to the nation that had imprisoned him. Look forward, not back. It was, I realized, a lesson in healing, in forgiveness, in refusing to drink from the cup of bitterness."

And so as Christians who believe in the Love Commandment and as Episcopalians who embrace a wide and diverse view, where all people are welcome to gather around God's table saying the same liturgy, yet possessing diverse views on politics, theology and more, I believe we have a unique and special calling to the ministry of reconciliation. St. Paul said it far better than I ever could, "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

Just as the sinful women in today's reading from Luke

As Kazuko walked down the hallways of Sakai Intermediate school she came upon the glass case holding her gift to the school, the small Japanese doll with the orange and blue kimono stared back at her. It was her gift to the school so that children would never forget that American citizens were once taken from their homes and imprisoned. It was as if the doll was saying, "I am a sign of reconciliation to the world, always look forward, not back."
Amen!

“A SERMON PREACHED”

by Megan Castellan
The General Theological Seminary

Colossians 1:15-20

Recently in seminary, I've gotten back into an old hobby. I taught myself to knit in college, for reasons I can't remember any more, though I'm sure they were extremely important. And now I'm back into it.

It's a good seminary hobby: it doesn't take much abstract thought, I don't have to exert pastoral authority over the yarn, the yarn doesn't ask deep probing questions about the nature of God or the universe of me, and doesn't require that I remember what occurred at the Council of Nicea or Constantinople. All that is required is that I sit there and play with the pretty yarn and the two sticks. And make loops. Lots and lots of little loops. Loops and loops and loops and loops. And at the end, I have a nice, concrete end product that I can prove exists. This is no small feat.

There is a catch though.

The magic of knitting is also its downside. The magic is this: you get to turn one solitary piece of string into a three-dimensional object, and feel like the smartest, magician-like person in the world. However, should you make a mistake at the beginning, all the way at the bottom of your lovely sweater, your perfect scarf, should you drop a stitch and make a hole in the toe of your sock....You are completely screwed. You have to unravel everything, all the way back to the problem and fix it. All the way back. All those rows. All that work. Because the problem with knitting is that you're working with one piece of string to make all those loops. All those loops are connected, in ways you can't see until you mess up. That one piece of yarn is a tight rope. It's either a great performance or a disaster. Everything is connected. What you do in one place will affect the entire piece. So it really is a lot more complicated than you'd initially think.

In our church recently, it's become a trend to talk about reconciliation. But as with many things, reconciliation is possibly one of those words we use without explaining what we mean. It looks great on a bumper sticker, but try to

go much past that, and we get confused.

I'd say reconciliation is much like fixing a dropped stitch in knitting. Reconciliation is getting back to that common thread that held you together in the first place. It's remembering that something, in fact, did! hold you together in the first place. Some common experience maybe, some link, some common heritage. Or maybe it was just common humanity.

Because we forget that link exists. We pretend that it's us versus them. That there are 'other people' out there to defeat, and that God is divvying us all up on some huge game board somewhere. In the letter to the Colossians today, the author pulls us back from that philosophy: Christ "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together...for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." (*Col. 1:15-20*)

In Christ all things hold together, are knit together. -if you want to play around with the Greek a bit-- All creation holds together in Christ, and we come together in him. When we break apart, when we cause division and separation, when we throw up walls,--- we deny this. We act like it's not true.

Reconciliation is a remembering of what we truly are. It's a remembering of who we are, where we are. It's coming home.

It's not like it's easy. It's not like it's painless. Lord only knows the problems in the church, in the world, are real, and they aren't over small matters. They are emotional and heart-felt, and people are hurting for real. The problems we have aren't going to go away any time soon. (Though, to be fair, it's not like going home is always pain-free in reality either...)

Reconciliation, though, isn't about shoving things under the carpet, or hugging it out, or singing "Kumbaya" in a happy circle until the endorphins flow. I'm not even sure it's about fixing the problem, either. Reconciliation just looks across the chasm and sees another child of God as an equal. Sees another creature beloved of God, just as you are. It's just a change of perspective.

But, at the same time, that's massive. It's a huge change, to recognize someone you thought was the enemy, the Other, as someone who could be you, had circumstances been different. They are human, all of a sudden. They are like you. They are reconciled.

Three years ago this week, I went to live in East Jerusalem for a few months. Towards the end of my stay there, I decided to take a day trip back into Bethlehem with two friends, fellow American women. We took the 'normal' route into the nearby city, via two taxis and an Israeli military checkpoint: which was less thorough for us because we were Americans. On the way into the city, I saw three Palestinian boys selling chewing gum. We stopped, and I bought some, and learned that they were from D'heisha Refugee camp: the eldest was 9, the youngest was 7. We kept going, and I didn't think anything else about it—everyone's poor, lots of people sold stuff, and we were busy. The day passed, and we saw the sights: the Nativity church, the Milk Grotto, the Olive wood carving shops, and everything, and then it was time to leave. On our way back to the checkpoint, there were the boys again.

The youngest wanted me to buy more candy. I did, and kept moving. We had to meet our Jerusalem taxi on the other side. He kept following, demanding that I pay him more. Now I had run out of money, and we were approaching the checkpoint. The soldiers started yelling at the children.

The problem with being a refugee, or raised by refugee parents, or living in a camp is that you don't have identification papers. You can't pass a checkpoint. The children couldn't pass the checkpoint, and now they were too close.

The soldiers yelled for us women to get in the metal chute to the side of the road, and one young soldier ran in front of us, ran to the center, dropped down behind a pile of sand-bag pile and aimed his machine gun back down the road where we had just come. I kept my eyes on him, because I kept thinking that I couldn't imagine what happens to a person when they watch a child shot. I didn't know I could deal with that. It was happening too quickly and all I could think of was those three boys, selling their gum, and getting too close to a metal shack on a dirt road.

The soldier released the safety and that's the loudest sound I've ever heard.

Then something else.

The soldier suddenly got up, ran back to the side of the road, and ran back with his helmet.

He yelled something in Arabic, back down the road, and I suddenly thought of his mother, sending her son off to a horrible, dangerous job. I thought of her telling him to remember to wear his helmet, because it was the least she could do, this nameless woman sitting somewhere worrying about her teenaged son, barely done being a kid himself.

The soldiers gave us the all-clear, and waved us through. Apparently it was over, with no shots fired. But not really. It was the kind of experience that takes the snow globe of your life and shakes it firmly. You don't know which way is up anymore, and start to strongly suspect that maybe no way is permanently up.

Because there are those little kids, with no way out of Bethlehem, and at the wrong end of a machine gun. All because they sold me Arabic Chiclets. And there's that young soldier, who looked the same age as my younger brother. Who ran back in the middle of a stand-off to get his helmet, like he was remembering someone's advice to stay safe. And I think maybe he did the best he knew how. And I don't think there was any enemy that day; it was boys shooting boys. And the only thing that placed one on one side of the gun was an accident of birth. A twist of circumstance.

In the end, we all ended up in the same place. All of us standing on a dusty road in Bethlehem, the four boys, the three women. All beloved by God. All bound together in Christ. All equal. Everything else fades into the background.

That's what reconciliation is—it's that chaos of the dusty road. It's that flipping around of everything you thought you knew. All those neat assumptions I thought I had about right and wrong and in-between that day got tossed out the window. Reconciliation reminds us that, in the end, we're all there. We're all human, vulnerable, and standing on the same road. Holding onto the same rope. Bound up in the same God. And once we get up enough courage to look around and see everyone else here with us, everything else will follow.

“FREEDOM AND LIBERTY”

Laurel Dahill
Seabury-Western Seminary

This sermon was developed at PEP and delivered at
St. Matthew’s Church in Evanston, Ill. on July 1, 2007.

Collect for Independence Day
Matthew 5:43-48
Offertory Hymn: “O Beautiful for Spacious Skies”

This week we celebrate our country’s independence. We prayed in our Collect for God to “grant that we and all the people of this land may have grace to maintain our liberties.” The history of America is an important aspect of our national identity and bound up with words like “liberty” and “freedom.” All those things that the founding fathers did in establishing our nation are as real now as they were over two hundred thirty years ago. I was recently in Philadelphia where Independence Hall is preserved in the state it was in when the Constitution was signed, and an entirely new form of government was brought to life. The concepts of freedom and liberty lay at the heart of the Constitution, which is the heart of who we are as Americans. At the heart of who we are as Christians has a slightly different emphasis.

Our Constitution gives us the freedom to practice our many religions in this country. The first amendment states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” For all the history buffs here: that Amendment was written in 1791, two years after our first American Prayer Book was introduced in 1789. We have a small section in the Prayer Book titled Historical Documents, but in fact our Prayer Book is in itself an historical document whose first appearance predates the Constitution of the United States. Considering that it also includes the entire Book of Psalms, it could be argued that it predates most written language as well. The Psalms being written over the course of five centuries beginning about five hundred years before Jesus was born, which is about two thousand years ago. A thousand-and-a-half years later the New World, a land of promise, was discovered and populated as the New Canaan, and “in the Course of human events,” as the Declaration of Independence states, eleven generations later here we sit in the State of Illinois worship-

ping by the lake on a Sunday morning. It is freedom that, in part, allows for this assembly to take place, but it is in liberty, that we actually sit here. Liberty predates freedom far more vastly than the world history that I just outlined.

We hear the word “freedom” often, but what of “liberty?” What’s the difference between “freedom” and “liberty?” Can you define liberty without using the word freedom? I think the difference between these two words is the same as the difference between navy blue and midnight blue. It’s a matter of quality. Freedom emphasizes the opportunity given for the exercise of one’s rights. As Abraham Lincoln said, “In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free.” Liberty, though often interchangeable with freedom, stands over and against the renegade exercise of freedom. As we will sing later, “confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.” I believe that it is for Liberty that we must strive, both for ourselves and for others. God focuses the definition of liberty for Christians from a broad freedom-like notion to actions grounded in the perfect love of God.

But what is God’s liberty? The nature of God is to love, to create, to renew, and to restore. God is unimpeded in this. Latitude is freedom in the sense of being able to do many things without being stopped. Liberty is pure and simple freedom, uncomplicated and unquestionable. God is and God does. We are part of God’s pure and simple liberty, God’s freedom of creation. As such we reflect the image of God in our being. We are drawn together in the Body of Christ. It is from this liberty that we move about our daily lives, touching the lives of others. The question is: do we touch others in the liberty of God in our daily lives? Freedom and liberty refer to an absence of undue restrictions and an opportunity to exercise one’s rights and powers without externally imposed restraints. Freedoms end when they encounter a contrary freedom of another person. Liberty lacks that distinction: my liberty never contradicts or limits your liberty. God’s liberty does not inhibit, but promotes.

So what is God’s liberty for us? To become all the things we as Christians claim to be. We are made in the image of God. We are free to make choices: to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God. Sometimes easier said than done. From the beginning, human beings have misused their freedom and made wrong choices. We have sinned, and sin has power over us because in it we lose our liberty when our relationship with God is distorted. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians, “Take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.” But our help is in God

who reveals God's self and God's will, through nature and history, through many seers and saints, and most especially in Jesus Christ, our teacher, our liberator, and our saviour. By this we show Christ's light and love in the world as children of God's liberty. In the Epistle of James we note the actions we are called to do. "Those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, being not hearers who forget but doers who act - they will be blessed in their doing." We are blessed in the acts of loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us, as Jesus says in today's gospel, so that we may be children of our Father in heaven. God's liberty for us is manifest in the acting out of Christian love for one another.

We have seen the inspiration for the Constitution in the past, in scripture and history. We work to live into these ideals today, and in our Collect this morning we pray that freedom and liberty, won by our forefathers, be passed on to nations yet unborn. Liberty passed on. There is a difference between freedom and liberty. Where freedom is closer to compromise, liberty is closer to grace. Freedom may be "just another word for nothing left to lose," but Liberty is that for which we must always strive, because liberty is that condition in which we can become the people God intends for us to be.

“REJOICE WITH ME”

Leslie A. Flemming
Bexley Hall

Sermon for Proper 19C

“Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.” How many of you have had the experience of losing something precious? For those of us who have been the parents of small children, you know that feeling of panic when you suddenly lose your child in a crowded department store, and that sense of relief when the voice comes over the loudspeaker, “Will the parents of ... please come to the information desk?” In one of my particularly sharp memories of Tucson, shortly after an 8 year old girl had been murdered there walking home from a friend’s house, our daughter Elizabeth didn’t come home on time one evening. We were terrified and even called the police. Fortunately, the police found her at the home of a neighbor whom we didn’t even realize she knew. I can still remember the relief and joy I felt when a burly police officer knocked at our door with Elizabeth’s little hand in his!

If we feel such joy as human parents when we recover our precious children, what must God feel about us? In today’s Gospel lesson we have two vivid examples of the feelings of someone who has found something lost. With the parable of the lost sheep, have you ever wondered who was looking after the other 99 sheep while the shepherd went off looking for the lost one? The parable doesn’t tell us.

But Jesus suggests in it that any reasonable person, even one of the scribes and Pharisees so critical of him, would diligently search for such a sheep. And a good thing for the sheep too! One thing we know about sheep is that they are highly social animals, and they flock tightly together. If a sheep gets isolated, it gets anxious and disoriented – like a small child! The sheep, like the child, needs to be found for its own survival! And what is the reaction of the shepherd who has finally located this lost sheep? Joy! “Rejoice with me,” he says, “for I have found my sheep that was lost.”

Just so in the parable of the lost coin. Although note in this parable that what has been lost is even more precious. In the parable of the sheep, the lost

sheep was only 1/100 of the flock. Here the coin is small, a drachma, about a day's wages in ancient Palestine, but it represents 1/10 of this woman's savings. So what does she do? What any of you would do if you lost a \$10 bill. She turns on the lights, pulls out the furniture, sweeps diligently, and doesn't stop until she finds it. When she finds it, again there is joy: "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost."

Why does the Gospel show Jesus telling these stories? Here we are in Luke in the middle of Jesus' travels from Galilee to Jerusalem for the final encounter. Along the way, Jesus has deliberately befriended those whom the religious establishment considered outcasts: the toll-collectors, the hated collaborators with the Roman government, and others who presumably don't follow the Pharisees' rigid purity laws. He tells these two parables, and the one following them, the one we call the parable of the Prodigal Son, which we don't read this year, in response to the criticism of the religious leaders. All these outcasts were flocking to hear Jesus. Dismayed, the religious leaders, as Luke tells us, "were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them,'" i.e., he relates to them as friends.

What is more important, he tells these parables to tell his hearers, and, by extension, us, something about God. Some contemporary theologians believe that God has a preference for the poor. If we read these parables rightly, it would seem that God also has a preference for outcasts and sinners. Not only does God actively welcome outcasts and sinners, bringing them into the community of love. More, God is acutely aware of all that God has created and knows when something or someone is lost. And God cares deeply for God's people, lost or not. Look at the Israelites in today's lesson from Exodus. They made a golden calf, completely forgetting who it was who had liberated them from Egypt.

Despite God's threats, God is easily persuaded by Moses to restore the people. And how about the sins attributed to Paul in the letter to Timothy: blasphemy, persecution, violence. Yet, amazingly, God has drawn Paul into ministry! And so here, God actively, diligently, searches for sinners, actively rejoicing and celebrating when someone outside the fold comes back in, when sinners are found. When sinners return, does God berate them and threaten to punish them for their sins? Doesn't look like it! God carries them home, God calls out to friends and neighbors, God throws a party!

So where are we in this scene? Are we among the 99 sheep, safely flock-

ing together? In with the 9 coins, safely in the coin bank? Mark Hollingsworth, the bishop of the Diocese of Ohio, has a green stole with 99 white sheep on one side of it, and one black sheep on the other. When I first saw it I thought to myself, which one am I? Stiff-necked, self-righteous, judgmental person that I am, do I think I'm one of the white sheep?

Or are we one of the lost sheep, one of the lost coins? Perhaps some people know clearly when they are lost. Those in prison. Those hitting bottom with drug or alcohol addiction. The truth is, we're all lost, we're all sinners, we all need to be found by God. For you it may be alcohol or drug addiction, or perhaps you're a workaholic. For someone else, it might be estrangement from adult children or other relatives. Perhaps you've been dishonest in work or unfaithful to your spouse or partner. Perhaps I've intentionally hurt someone.

We can get ourselves lost so easily! And when we're lost, we get anxious and disoriented, just like those sheep. We may even feel estranged from God because of our sins. But God doesn't leave us out there, abandoned to the elements or pushed into the corner. To God, each of us is precious, and God is always anxious to get us back.

I want to share with you another story that I found. A well-known speaker started off his seminar by holding up a \$20 bill. In the room of 200, he asked, "Who would like this \$20 bill? Hands started going up. He said, "I am going to give this \$20 to one of you but first, let me do this." He proceeded to crumple the dollar bill up. He then asked, "Who still wants it?" Still the hands were up in the air. "Well," he replied, "What if I do this?" And he dropped it on the ground and started to grind it into the floor with his shoe. He picked it up, now all crumpled and dirty. "Now who still wants it?" Hands in the air again.

"My friends, you have all learned a very valuable lesson. Because it did not decrease in value," he said. "It was still worth \$20. Many times in our lives, we are dropped, crumpled, and ground into the dirt by the decisions we make and the circumstances that come our way. We feel as though we are worthless. But no matter what has happened or what will happen, you will never lose your value in God's eyes. To Him, dirty or clean, crumpled or finely creased, you are still priceless."

You are still priceless to God! And we can be sure that God will always take the initiative in coming to look for us. God will send shepherds and sweeping

women, priests and friends, spiritual directors and counselors, whoever can bring us back home. God never gives up on us, God always rejoices when God finds us.

Can we do the same? How in our ministries as clergy and lay people do we allow ourselves, despite our sinfulness, to follow Jesus and seek out the sinners and outcasts? Who are the lost in our churches, in our communities? For whom do we need to diligently seek, so that we can rejoice when they rejoin the fold? Pray that as God actively sends people into our lives to bring us home, we can be led by God to do the same for others.

“A SERMON FOR ASH WEDNESDAY”

Hugh M. Grant
General Theological Seminary

Isaiah 58:1-12

How in today's world are we to loose the bonds of injustice? How can we work for justice in a world where inequity and unfairness are so prevalent, where so few have so much, and so many have so little? It seems overwhelming, if not impossible. And yet, as citizens of the richest and most powerful nation in the world, loosing the bonds of injustice should be within our grasp.

Many would say that we are establishing justice. They would say that we are fighting for democracy around the world, that we are a righteous and freedom-loving nation. According to Isaiah, God has a few words for a people that thought much the same thousands of years ago. “Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness, and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask me for righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God...Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.”

As well meaning as we might sometimes be, we often deceive ourselves. We think we are helping, but we are not. We are really helping ourselves. We think we are practicing righteousness, but we are quarreling and fighting, clenching our fists—fists that hold onto money and oil and power and a way of life that often blinds us to the suffering of others.

This clenching, this hoarding, creates its own suffering. It is like an addiction. It makes us want more, makes us believe we need more. And the more we have, the more we can appear to exist on our own, independent. We can appear to function without the help of other people. We become individualists.

Individualism distorts our relationship with God; because it puts God in an individual box too, a box that is not big enough for the rest of humanity—a box too small for the totality of creation which God permeates.

Isaiah invites us to view reality in a different way through turning the concept of fasting upside down. The fast God desires from us is not the self-absorbed piety of sackcloth and ashes. God wants us to remember our connectedness to the rest of humanity, to share our bread, our clothing, and our shelter. Fasting does not mean depriving ourselves to gain God's attention and favor; fasting means meeting God in the forlorn faces of people more oppressed than we are, and helping them.

We are more likely to go about the difficult work of remembering our inter-connectedness if we are able to see ourselves in the faces of those who are in need. And we can see ourselves in other's faces by dwelling on the truth that our existence is intricately related to the being of all God's creation—especially to the other billions of people who share our common humanity, our blood, and our dreams of happiness and peace. But dwelling on the truth of our unity, we can begin to dismantle the illusion of a purely individual, independent existence and recognize the truth of our interrelatedness.

People begin to treat each other differently when they take note of similarities. Reconciliation and healing begin to take place. This is why support groups work—they illuminate the common experience of people in particular types of difficult situations or circumstances. Our behavior towards other people changes when we recognize that they are us; when we put ourselves in their shoes or try to look at things from their points of view.

The simplicity and quiet of the season of Lent offer us the opportunity to be more intentional about our actions and practices. We begin this season with the imposition of ashes, with the words "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Coming from and returning to the dust is a powerful reminder that we all come from the same substance, that we are already the same substance. Being the same substance does not mean that we are not unique. But it does mean that we can never know the fullness of our uniqueness in a vacuum. Even our uniqueness depends on the differentiation of ourselves from others.

We over-celebrate our uniqueness at our own peril. As Thomas Merton wisely observes,

All sin starts from the assumption that the self exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life in

the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface.

Merton goes on to distinguish between this false self and the true self, which exists in God. Like God, our true selves take a lifetime to get to know. Merton went to the monastery to find his, only to find himself sent back toward the very world he tried to escape. As he puts it: “There is only one true flight from the world; it is not an escape from conflict, anguish and suffering, but the flight from disunity and separation, to unity and peace in the love of other [people]. The passage from Isaiah today sends us on a similar trajectory, away from self absorption to interconnection.

Centuries later, the pattern of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection invites us even more specifically and deeply into community. Because of Jesus we need not fear that we come from and will return to dust. As members of the body of Christ, we share in his resurrection and in the on-going creation of God’s reign on earth. How can we remember that we are co-creators with God? We need only heed the words of Isaiah: “If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places” (*Is 58:9-11*).

God loves us so extravagantly. God loves to satisfy our needs. For our needs to be satisfied, we need to know what they are.

What are your deepest needs? Your deepest desires? Of course, we can get in touch with our desires and needs by mining the depths of our hearts. But we can also find them by simply looking at the faces and listening to the petitions of those who cry out for help all around us.

Because we are all one. One huge and beloved child of God—the human race that God deigned to join in order to reconcile and heal us, to make us one with God and with each other through the gift of our savior Jesus Christ.

“HOUSEHOLD CHORES”

Jody J. Harrison
Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest

Luke 10:38-42 Eucharistic Lectionary Year C

The year is 1965. The place is a middle income neighborhood in Dallas, Texas. It is June. It is so hot the tar on the telephone poles bubbles. Children punch them to just to pop the black goo and watch it slowly drip down, poking it with a finger or a stick. Any child can tell you school is out for almost three months!

Youngsters roam the neighborhood in search of things to do. Bicycles are the means of transportation. They take you everywhere! Boys cruise the neighborhoods, visit with buddies, check out what the girls are doing, and round up a group to play baseball or kickball after supper when the weather is cooler.

Summer mornings after breakfast, most youngsters are home, doing chores. Not until chores are finished is playtime allowed. There's not much to think of, except completing the chores to catch up with the neighborhood "gang": for fishing in the creek, for a large, sneaky, catfish or cruising the neighborhood to play. Dusting, mopping, vacuuming, cleaning, weeding the garden, cleaning dad's grill, mowing the yard are rushed through thoroughly: no child ever wants to have to do it over. That's time away from play with the neighborhood kids! Chores: household responsibilities. Mothers and Dads are clear: every youngster is to do their share. After chores and lunch, in the heat of the day, tiny ones and moms take naps. Girls gather at each others houses to play Barbies or board games. Boys gather at each other's houses to play with trucks, G.I. Joes, Leggos or Lincoln Logs. Some find a quiet corner to read, draw, write or stretch out in the shade to laze away the few hours in the cool grass, watching clouds drift by, or daydream of doing whatever they want when they are a "grownup."

Sometimes though in these hot summer afternoons, quarrels erupt. Boys' voices raise in anger; NO, YES WHY? BECAUSE IT'S MINE! A punch; a groan, a scuffle, then MOM! A couple of those boys might not play together for a while; but usually, given enough time, they come together again. They learn to share; to tolerate the other's differences. Girls do the same. Often, girls are catty; cutting; or sweet to another girl's face, but then exclude that girl from playtimes. One gets

bossy; another demeaning; still another, too whining. It's the south; girls get downright vicious at times.

Still, over time these small groups changes out; again and again. For the most part, it's the neighborhood children: all nationalities: Polish, Czech, Mexican, Lebanese, Italian, German; all denominations: Catholic, Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist, Jewish, no religion. They are all children; they need each other to play with; and learn to get along. They learn to tolerate small differences. They respect the other when one speaks up for the greater good: against a bully, an abusive parent; an injustice. They hold together as one group, especially during hot summer months that seem to stretch out forever. Long, lazy, brutal Texas days stretch out ahead, one day in front of the other. In many households in my neighborhood growing up, families are large, which, to a child, means more playmates. The Maddox kids across the way have five children and Carl was the only boy. There are rarely discussions of what is girl's work and what is boy's work. If a parent tells us to do something, it is done; likewise for any neighborhood child visiting any neighborhood house.

The Balboa family next door has six children. They are close too, but louder, chaotic. But Robert, the oldest, often scorned some chores and designated them as "girl's work," sneaking out before the sun rises high on those hot, sweltering days to languish with a fishing pole at the creek. His chores often fall to his sisters. Their complaints of his avoiding chores often are ignored by his parents.

In Luke's Gospel story today, Martha complains to Jesus about Mary only listening and not helping out. As a child hearing this story, I used to sit and nod. Umhm. That's my sister Kelley; doing whatever she can to get out of her chores. And I wonder, what is wrong with Jesus? Why doesn't he say, "Martha, what can I do to help?" Jesus sounds like Robert next door. He doesn't sound anything like Carl Maddox, who always helps out. I often wonder if other people think Jesus is rude. I mean, after all, it takes work to get all the hot dishes ready at the same time for a meal! And someone is expected to do it! Martha's house must be hot, with the stove making the kitchen even more sweltering: remember, they don't have air conditioning. Here's Martha, working away, trying to get the meal on the table, so everyone can eat!

As a child, I'm wondering, why is Jesus so rude? Why can't they carry on a conversation while Jesus and Mary set the table: include all of them in the conversation? I want Jesus to say, "Martha, you look worn out. Let Mary and I help

you. What can we do: set the table, pour the drinks?”

And yet, every time this gospel reading comes up, I hear something different in it. There are times when I wonder about Mary. The Gospel does not tell us what she was doing before this supper. Maybe she was on her feet all day, at the market, cleaning the rooms, walking all over town, running errands for Martha. And now she is thinking, I need to sit and rest. And, after all, good conversation is just as essential in hospitality as a meal to welcome a visitor. Mary is slowing down for the day.

We rarely slow down. We multi-task. And, when we get together, family members often quarrel. We have no idea what may have happened right before Jesus arrived! “Mary, did you remember to get the flour and the figs when you were out today?” Martha, you didn’t tell me you needed more flour! Yes I did. No you didn’t. YES I DID. NO YOU DIDN’T! Jesus is going to BE here soon. I don’t have time. Well, MAKE Time!

Mary is a gifted, active listener, a gentle presence, a quiet encourager, a wonderful respite for Jesus after being picked apart by sarcastic disbelievers all day long. I wonder if Jesus wants to just relax and Mary is helping him do just that. How often do we find a wonderful listener who isn’t at the ready to pick apart all that we say and do?

In the early evening hours after dinner, when a typical Texas sun begins to wane from the upper 100s to the high 90s the youngsters in the neighborhood come together. It is easier to play then. A cool breeze occasionally gently blows through their sweat soaked shirts. Boys and girls explore: places like the creek behind the neighbor’s yard where two horses graze. Gurgling water trickles in a creek beyond the clump of tall trees down a barely discernible path created by children. Wild honeysuckle fragrances fill your nostrils. Children are mindful not to trip over the large crabapples. It’s a wondrous forest to a child. A place to explore: butterflies, quiet, you can barely hear city noises here. Children explore the creek, which is full of fish: lots of perch, an occasional sunfish and the coveted catfish!

Parents visit with each other alone after supper. It gives children a chance to catch up with who had what for dinner, and whose parent is in a bad mood, delaying the time when the child goes home. It gives a quarrelling brother or sister a chance to play with the neighborhood children without being right under the thumb of a bossy brother or sister. Sleepovers are often planned during these

times. Whose house will the group hang out with for catching fireflies, or home-made ice cream? At the end of the day, family members of totally different temperament can sometimes find the good in each other. They stick up for each other when one of them is attacked or ridiculed by an outsider. My sister Kelley and I quarreled growing up, but one day Robert made her cry and was shocked a freckled face girl would defend her little sister's right to be a total brat! Robert and I made up and became big fishing buddies; he taught me to catch sneaky catfish instead of stupid perch!

We all can be the wonderfully talented, multi-tasking, loving cook in Martha who gives her all, including sometimes having a short temper. We also need to remember to be the gentle Mary who listens attentively to a worn out Jesus or just make time to be a VERY good friend. We need Jesus to remind us when we should sow down and cut our "to do" list in half.

And maybe, just maybe, Jesus could volunteer to set the table and clean up the dishes!

“RECONCILIATION & HEALING”

Julie Nelson
General Theological Seminary

Luke 5:17-25

So, have you seen those commercials for Staples, the office supply store? The ones with the Easy button? There is usually some office crisis or problem that someone, who is seemingly helpless, tries to fix with some ridiculous solution. My favorite is the one with the cat. The boss walks into the employee's office and he has an easel sitting on his desk and a cat painting is painting with her paw. She says, what is that? He says, "It's a copy cat. He's going to save us a boatload on color copies." And then you realize that there is a pie chart next to the cat that the cat is trying to replicate. The boss says, "You need an Easy button." And, of course, the announcer launches into the Staples spiel about how Staples can make color copies easier and cheaper, etc.

An Easy button. In the Staples commercial world, they portray us as helpless creatures whose office supply problems are solved by pushing an Easy Button.

A few years ago, a friend of mine found herself in a little crisis of her own, not with office supplies, but with her brother. When my friend was visiting her brother's family, he made a comment about a parenting choice that she'd made, she overreacted and the next thing you know they had a horrible fight and she had said terrible things to her brother.

A couple of days later, my friend sent a letter to her brother. She apologized and explained the dynamic that had caused her bad reaction and asked for his forgiveness. She also expressed her forgiveness for what he had done. You know, pressing the Easy button - expecting that all would be forgiven and everything would go back to normal.

But, that's not what happened. Her brother's reply announced that he no longer wanted to spend time with her and her children. He blamed her and her

“abusive behavior” for the entire incident and refused to acknowledge that he had any part in the disagreement. So much for the easy button.

As you can imagine, my friend was angry and disappointed and sad and lots of other things.

Well, because they live in separate towns it was easy to avoid each other, until it was time for their parents’ wedding anniversary. My friend said to me that she just didn’t know what to do about it. She didn’t know how her brother would behave – would he make a scene if they were in the same place? She was still angry and didn’t really trust herself to behave appropriately. And then she said something very interesting, she said, “You know, I really want to forgive him, but I just don’t feel like it anymore. I mean, I say in my head that I’ve forgiven him, but I don’t really feel any different about him, I’m still mad at him.”

In today’s gospel, Jesus encounters a paralyzed man. A broken man. Really. Literally. A broken man. This man is physically broken and unable to move on his own or care for himself.

Now, I think it is safe to guess that this man was probably also spiritually broken. The text doesn’t tell us how he became paralyzed, if he was born that way or if he was injured, but I suspect that no matter how it happened, this man believes that he deserves what’s happened to him. We know from the story of the blind man and other stories that it was common for Jews in the first century to believe that physical injury or deformity were punishment for sins that someone, either the person or their parents, had committed.

This man lived not only with the physical difficulties of being paralyzed, but with the shame and the guilt that came with it. He was a broken man. Lying on a bed. Being carried by others. Broken. Guilty. Helpless.

But, he comes to Jesus. He comes with the faith that if he shows up, Jesus will heal him.

And Jesus does heal him, saying “Your sins are forgiven”. Your sins are forgiven. Jesus knows that physical healing is no good to the man if he remains spiritually broken. The man must first be reconciled to God, himself, and the

world - he must lose his feelings of guilt and shame before physical healing will be worth anything. So, he says, "Your sins are forgiven." "Your sins are forgiven."

Naturally, as is usually the case with Jesus, the people around Jesus get nervous when he says things like this, so. Jesus replies to them by saying: "Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven you", or to say, "Stand up and walk?"

Is it easier to say "Your sins are forgiven you" or is it easier to say "Stand up and walk?" In this passage, it almost seems like Jesus is pressing the Easy button. It does seem easy for Jesus to say these words to the man.

And it might be easy for Jesus, but I think it might not be so easy for the man. I mean, if you were paralyzed and someone told you that you were forgiven and to stand up and walk, would you even try? Or would you think they were crazy?

But the man does it. He comes to Jesus with faith - broken, shameful, guilty and helpless - but with faith. He comes to Jesus wanting healing and Jesus gives him forgiveness. And in that encounter, in relationship with the living Jesus the man accepts it - the man takes the forgiveness offered to him and is released from the shame and guilt. He sees himself as a loved child of God and is restored to wholeness. He stands up and walks.

I think my friend was a lot like that man on the pallet. Broken - she was bitter and angry. Guilty - knowing that she had caused this situation. Helpless - she knew she couldn't make her brother forgive her and she didn't feel like she could make herself forgive him.

And this is when it occurred to me, Christine really didn't need her brother's forgiveness. She needed Jesus' forgiveness. And, Christine didn't really need to forgive her brother she just needed to reconcile with him.

So I said to her, "You know, maybe it doesn't really matter what you feel. I mean, I don't feel like going to the gym and it's not easy to get there, but I go twice a week because the exercise is good for me. I occasionally don't feel like writing my tithing check and sometimes it's not easy to write it, but I do because I know that it changes me - it changes my perspective about the world, it changes

my relationship with God, it changes my relationship with money. Maybe what matters is that you just be faithful. That you just go forward with faith.”

I suggested to my friend that she go to her parent’s party and that she be polite and kind to her brother whenever she found herself in his proximity. She didn’t have to gush all over him or apologize again or force him to reconcile with her. She didn’t have to feel like she had forgiven him. It wasn’t going to be easy. But maybe she just needed to treat him with dignity, respect, and kindness, no matter how she actually felt about him.

And you know, it worked. Not quite like the Staples Easy button works in the commercial, but it worked. Somewhere in the process of treating her brother with dignity and respect she began to believe that he deserved that dignity and respect. She began to be relieved of her shame and guilt for her bad behavior – and accept the forgiveness that Jesus was offering, even if her brother wasn’t willing to offer it just yet. In the process of reconciliation – in the activity of reconciling – she encountered the living Jesus, she experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit and could feel herself being restored and healed. She was able to stand up and walk.

You know, the truth about that Staples Easy Button is that it really isn’t all that easy. Staples might have all the products that you need to run an office efficiently, but you still need to get in your car, and drive to the store, and find a place to park, and go inside, and ask for help because you can never find anything in those giant stores, and wait in line, and, oh yeah, have the money to pay for the stuff. The Staples Easy Button does not solve your office problems on the spot. It just doesn’t work that way.

I believe that reconciliation and healing work a bit like that. There is no easy button. We can’t just make reconciliation and healing happen – even if we ask for or offer forgiveness. But, we can show up. We can stay in conversation with each other. We can begin the process of reconciliation – the activity of reconciliation – even when it is hard, even when we don’t feel like it.

And somewhere in that activity, I believe we will encounter the living Jesus who forgives us and restores us to wholeness and health.

“FOR THE FEAST OF THE ANNUNCIATION”

Kathryn Reinhard
Berkeley at Yale Divinity School

Luke 1:26-38

When I was born, my parents did a strange thing. It was the late 70's and we were living in rural Ohio. My father was a high school teacher and my mother worked as a corporate attorney. My mother earned much more money in her job than my father, so when she became pregnant with me, their first child, my parents decided that, after I was born, my father would stay home and raise me while my mother would act as the family breadwinner.

These days, this kind of family situation is increasingly common. But in Ohio, in the 70s, it was practically unheard of. My father announced to his school board that, following my birth, he would be taking “paternity” leave. This caused a minor uproar. The day my parents brought me home from the hospital, they were interviewed by a local newspaper. The reporter had a hard time understanding my parents' arrangement – why my father would do something as emasculating as giving up his career, his independence, his power, to stay home with his child to cook and clean.

“How does it feel,” the reporter asked my father, “that your wife makes more money than you do?”

And my father, characteristically secure and levelheaded, answered, “I feel lucky that we have the financial means for me to stay home and raise my daughter.”

I've thought about that article many times throughout my life. It's always made me proud – my parents independently blazing their own trail when the social constructs of the time held no place for their understanding of vocation, relationship and family; my dad, every feminist's poster-boy, deflecting the reporter's sexist assumptions, too secure with himself to care what the reporter, or the general public, thought of his manhood.

However, in the past several years, something has come to my attention

about this article that I'd never noticed before. In all the hubbub about my dad, all the fuss made about him and his decision to stay home, not much is said in the article about my mom. Never once did the reporter ask her what it felt like to be responsible for the welfare of her family. What did it mean to be both a mother and provider? How did she experience her vocation?

The answer to the question that no one asked, how did my mother experience her vocation, was that it was very painful for her. My mother is an extremely smart woman, and a very good lawyer. She is organized, detail-oriented and thrives on constant stimulation. To this day, I am convinced that, had she stayed home with me rather than my father, she would have been not just bored, but stifled and miserable. Yet despite her talent, competence and intelligence, my mother struggled for years with her role as the breadwinner for our family. Men can find the role of breadwinner to be equally daunting and unfulfilling. But most of my mother's male contemporaries grew up in a society saturated with this gendered expectation. As a woman, my mom received no such "psychic" preparation for her role. And as my mother struggled to succeed in a male-dominated workplace, a daunting task in and of itself, she did so with no female role models, no examples of women who had come before her and succeeded. She had no one to show her that the roles of "mother" and "provider" needn't be mutually exclusive. So despite her all her success, excelling in a profession which she was good at, receiving promotions and significant financial compensation, and the notable achievement of solely providing for, what would become, her family of five, she struggled for years with crippling guilt (for "leaving" her children), and doubt about the validity of her vocation.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Annunciation, and I share my parents' story with you because it strikes me that our gospel lesson is also the story of a family whose lives and relationships did not quite fit with social expectations, and of a young mother who struggled to come to terms with her vocation.

I think when we hear the Annunciation story, what we remember most often is the ending, Mary's beautiful assent. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." And so elegantly, so (deceptively) simply, Mary opens her heart, her body, her life, to the power of God working God's will in and through her.

But we forget that at the beginning of the story, Mary is not at all certain of the wisdom of trusting divine messages. The angel Gabriel salutes her, "Greet-

ings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But Mary is much perplexed by his words and ponders what sort of greeting this might be.

We forget that what God asks Mary to assent to is the extremely counter-cultural, scandalous, and even dangerous status of becoming an unwed mother. Mary accepts her call with no assurances that her engagement to Joseph is secure, that she will not be socially shunned and rejected. God promises her a child who will be great, who will rule over a kingdom which will have no end. But God does not promise that her life will not change, that her plans and expectations for her life will unfold as she would have liked.

In fact, Mary’s vocation, bringing this strange and special child into the world, mostly leads to pain, confusion and heartbreak. Shortly after his birth, at the time of their purification, Mary brings her son to the Temple. An eccentric old man begs to hold the child and makes an ominous pronouncement: that her son’s life was fated for the rising and falling of many and that a sword would pierce her own soul.

Multiple times Scripture describes Mary as pondering things in her heart, like the time when her son becomes lost on a family trip to Jerusalem, and a frantic search discovers him in the Temple, improbably debating with the teachers. In her full and conflicted heart, Mary wrestles with the wondrous, odd and sometimes frightening events of her life, seeking answers to a call she answered so long ago, a call that brought her this child, whose life and work she doesn’t really understand.

Jesus’ adult life provides no clarification, no comfort for Mary. He leaves home to wander the land as a teacher, in the company of prostitutes, tax collectors and the most unsavory people, eventually rejecting her and his family. “Who are my mother and brothers?” he cries, when he refuses to see her. The fruits of her vocation seem to end in failure and despair. Mary watches as her son is executed, at the hands of an oppressive, militaristic government. Her mother’s heart breaks in two, and a sword indeed pierces her own soul.

In her vocation as my family’s provider, my mother has struggled to be faithful to God’s call, which she did not always understand. She suffered, she doubted and very rarely was she sure that she was doing the right thing. Yet despite the difficulty and confusion, there is much in my mother’s vocation that has been holy. She has taught me, and my brother and sister, that social expectations should never stop us from living into our hearts’ desire. And she has truly mod-

eled for us Christian vocation, living selflessly, giving of herself for others.

Many Christians struggle with vocation. We struggle with our call. We struggle to discern just what it is God would have us do with our lives. We grope our way through times of blind uncertainty: when the results of our work, of what we thought was our Godly vocation do not turn out as we expected, when the fruits of our labor are both strange and wondrous but also frightening and disappointing, times when we don't understand God's will or God's plan and when the voice of the angel, calling us to our own unique work, has grown faint, and we barely remember what it was that we were called to.

The story of Mary reminds us that the validity of our calls is not measured in clarity, understanding or ease, that through our pain, struggle, misunderstanding, and incomprehension, God is constantly working God's plans, in us and through the world. We do not always need foresight and understanding to accomplish God's work. God continues to work through us even when we experience struggle, pain and doubt. Mary's vocation seemed to end in the heartbreak and failure of the cross. Yet Mary is with Jesus' friends to witness the Resurrection. She is present at Pentecost, and is among those first Church leaders who received the Holy Spirit.

Our doubts, our uncertainties, our struggles are not failures for God. God has called us and our vocations are from God. God will not abandon the work he has begun in us. In this way, the Annunciation is a reassurance for us all: that as we work to discern God's will for our lives, and work to accomplish God's will in the world, uncertainty, pain and struggle do not prevent us from fulfilling God's purpose. If anything, they seem to be the cost of discipleship, an inevitable by-product of getting your life tangled up in God's. The good news is that God is always working through us, whether we always experience our vocations as fulfilling or not. All that is necessary from us is a small, brave assent when we hear God's call to us as his beloved.

“Greetings, favored ones! The Lord is with you.”

“RECONCILIATION”

Catherine Rickett
University of the South

It was August 20, 2005, hot, sunny, and crowded. Over 2,000 Episcopalians were at a good old fashioned, Southern-style tent meeting. Yes, we are Episcopalians and we were having a tent meeting. And it was no ordinary meeting. Bishop Duncan Gray shared with us his vision of the Episcopal church in MS: we were to be an inviting, transforming, and reconciling church. That was the vision that he shared with that crowd of 2000; it was a message of moving forward, of spreading the good news of the gospel in our own way in MS.

Eight days later MS was indeed transformed, not by the tent meeting, but by a powerful hurricane named Katrina. Her transforming power destroyed six coastal MS Episcopal churches and their communities. Devastation overtook joy in a mere eight days. For mile after mile, no structure, no community, was left unharmed. Even casinos were moved from the sea onto land, past the beaches and across the main road. Katrina swallowed the beaches and churned the towns into a splintered mass of destruction. Inviting? No. Transforming? Without a doubt, but hardly in line with any sort of planned diocesan vision. Reconciling? Now there is some food for thought.

The diocese's original vision of reconciling included a really great summer reading program for kids with poor reading skills. A secular reading institute, in companion with the Methodist, Catholic, and Episcopal churches are working together on this program. Theological differences have been put aside, and work continues toward a common goal for a common good. That is a form of reconciliation, and it had nothing to do with a hurricane.

Hmm. Back to Katrina. What does a hurricane have to do with reconciliation? We are washed in the waters of baptism; we ask to be cleansed of our sins and washed from our wickedness. Yet in one moment water became the enemy and a force of great destruction. Yet there is room in that flood for reconciliation; for our reconciliation of tragedy with the God of grace for whom we yearn.

Some would say that we ask the wrong question when we ask the question “why?” when tragedy happens. The great tennis player Arthur Ashe died of

AIDS contracted in a blood transfusion. Arthur Ashe wrote that he never asked God the “why me?” question for fear that God would indeed answer him. He did not want to remember what he might have done in his life to deserve his illness. I respect his perspective; I don’t know that any of us could bear to know what we might have done – or left undone – that would account for some proportionate personal tragedy. Fortunately, God’s grace does not work that way. We do not earn grace! Neither Arthur Ashe, nor do we, “earn” or deserve punishment, illness, or catastrophe. God and God’s grace is wonderfully blind to proportionality; we receive it in an abundance totally unbidden and undeserved – we receive it, not earn it, and it is God’s awesome gift to us.

Yet “why” and “why me” are perfectly human responses to unimaginable tragedies. And while some say that when we ask “why” we are asking the wrong question, I am not so sure that it is the wrong question, but that we ask an appropriate question in the wrong direction. We look to one another, we look in the mirror, we pound our fists and say “why?” And in so doing, we are looking to humanity for answers that only come from God. The reconciliation that we look for has nothing to do with any power that we have. We are looking for reconciliation in completely human language, when what we are looking for has to do with transformation in the language of God. It is a language in which we are woefully illiterate.

We only reconcile ourselves with God when we turn to God. Go ahead and yell! Ask every question that is in your heart. God knows the questions already. God can take our anger! In fact, anger is a sign of relationship, and that is what we are looking to build or to repair. God is not some phantom in the sky, but one who waits for us to say, yes, come, transform my life, my heart. Walk with me, God, through this suffering. Show me what transformation looks like. Help me rebuild my hope – and maybe my home.

I mourn what has been lost in MS. Some of my favorite places in the country no longer exist. There is a lingering sadness for what was, and I am a relative newcomer to MS. The sadness runs through generations, through families whose physical history has been lost.

But we are not lost. From places of total destruction, churches have reached out to one another and to the thousands of volunteers who came to help. They have provided worship space, showers, meals, lodging and prayer to all who came and to those who continue to come. Letters from the parishes now contain

words of hope, visions once again of worshipping on solid foundations – not of stone, but of faith.

Maybe today our coastal churches and people can start to hear the words that Jesus gave the disciples: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Maybe. The kingdom is not arriving to a happy people, to the unscathed and unharmed. The kingdom is washing ashore to a broken, tangled mess. Towns are gone. People are broken. And the church is still standing. The church lives on in a faith that does not depend on a building. Faith lives on in a broken people. The foundation is not gone and we have not been abandoned. Maybe now. Or maybe we need more time.

In either case, reconciliation seeps through all of God’s people as we walk within and through whatever chaos we find. In reaching out and starting to rebuild our lives, reconciliation comes in. We learn again and again that God is there, and it is our job and our call and our joy to reconcile ourselves to God. Whatever we face, we can lean on God. Storms do not leave us an abandoned people. Anger does not keep us from the kingdom. Reconciliation seeps -- or washes -- or floods -- into our lives when we lean on our God. Lean on God. Lean on God, whose mercy is greater than any storm.

“SERMON FOR PROPER 11, 2007”

Jaime M.W. Sanders
Church Divinity School of the Pacific

Genesis 18:1-10a, Psalm 15, Colossians 1:21-29, Luke 10:38-42

Please – sit down.

Make yourself comfortable.

Set aside your burdens; your many worries.

You are safe here.

You are an honored guest of God, our host on this earth.

You are a beloved friend of our Lord, who bade us set this table.

Sit. Relax. Take a morsel of bread, a sip of wine.

Renew your spirit, before you go forth to work again.

It is something like this that Abraham is told to have said to the three men who approached him one day, as Abraham “sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.” Abraham’s tent was probably black, made of the hair or hides of the goats that made up part of his wealth. Maybe not so comfortable in the heat of the day. Better to sit at the door, in the shade but fresh air, where he could keep an eye on his flocks and herdsman. For Abraham was a man of wealth, with slaves to watch his flocks. He could sit at his ease at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day.

But. Abraham left his place of ease when he “looked up and saw three men standing near him.” He “ran from the tent entrance to meet them.” And when he met them he bowed low to the ground – a sign of respect. Abraham bowed to the strangers, and said

“My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant.

Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet.

Rest under a tall oak tree.”

It was under the oaks of Mamre that Abraham invited the strangers to rest, and it was by the oaks of Mamre that Abraham had built an altar to the Lord.

While Abraham was resting in comfort by his tent home, with his wife Sarah inside, he saw three strangers. And he ran towards those strangers, bowed

to them, and invited them into space sacred to his God.

Sarah was a woman of dignity and honor, with slaves to serve her, but with her own hands she made cakes of flour to serve the visitors. Flour that wasn't easily come by, ready-milled from the store, but was ground from wheat with stones on the ground. Three generous cakes of flour she prepared, as Abraham selected a calf from his herd.

Abraham was the righteous patriarch of Israel. Maybe you remember that in Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Lazarus is with "father Abraham." In this passage today, the Lord tells Sarah that she will bear a son – the son through whom will come nations and kings. Abraham and Sarah are chosen by God to "keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice." Hospitality to strangers is part of the way of the Lord: a key part of a life of righteousness and justice. It was an attribute that was particularly associated with Abraham and his family. In a writing that was circulated in the Jewish community soon after Jesus' time, Abraham is even described as providing hospitality to death! A righteous person in Israel – a person who follows the way of the Lord – is one who honors strangers in providing hospitality. In the stories of the origins of Judaism, of the patriarchs, men of wealth and respect provided hospitality in a time of nomadic and village extended families.

The Israel of Jesus' time was not a time of nomadic independent families. And there were few righteous men of wealth and respect. It was a country under occupation by Rome, in which land was increasingly owned by a few absentee landowners. Men of wealth mostly got that way by greed and oppression, not by flocks of goats. And the host of our gospel story was not a wealthy patriarch or the mother of nations, but a simple woman named Martha.

Jesus and his disciples were traveling from Galilee toward Jerusalem. They traveled without money or food, dependent on the kindness of strangers. Remember Jesus' instructions to his disciples? "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals . . . whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them "The kingdom of God has come near to you." [Luke 10:8-9]

The kingdom of God has come near – because the sick are cured.

But – maybe – also – because the people of the town have shown hospi-

tality to strangers.

By traveling without money or provisions, bearing nothing but a message from the Lord – do the disciples become like the angels who visited Abraham and Sarah?

And by welcoming them, feeding them, listening to them in peace – these poor people of an occupied country regain the dignity of Abraham; the blessedness of Sarah. The righteousness of those who follow the way of the Lord.

Dignity regained – and also spread. For Martha is not the male head of an extended family; she doesn't have slaves and herds of goats. She is an unmarried woman, living in a village with her sister and brother. Of no particular importance and status in their society – but of great dignity and value in the eyes of Jesus. Dignity and importance that he makes manifest to them and others by accepting their hospitality. The word used to describe Martha's service is the word that became the English deacon – diakonai. Martha's sister Mary "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying" – the posture of a disciple – and Jesus said her choice "would not be taken away from her." Welcome a stranger with hospitality – listening to the word of the Lord – these acts of righteousness are not limited to people of wealth and worldly status – Jesus has chosen all people to keep the way of the Lord.

I am reminded of a woman in my extended family, whose funeral I attended not long ago. Like Martha, Ms. Brown knew oppression. She grew up black, in Louisiana, in the days of segregation. In those days, hotels and restaurants would not serve people of color. When travelers came to town, someone in the church would invite them into their home. And because food and money was scarce for everyone, all the people of the church would help feed the visitors, coming quietly to the kitchen door with a casserole, or a pie, or some vegetables from the garden. Even after she moved to Oregon, for her whole life, Ms. Brown kept that tradition of hospitality. No one visited her without being offered food. At her funeral, people talked about how she fed the whole neighborhood. She was never rich – but you could never call her poor, either. She had the dignity of one walking in the way of the Lord.

Who is that stranger coming now?

Please – sit down.

Make yourself comfortable.

Set aside your burdens; your many worries.
You are safe here.
You are an honored guest of God, our host on this earth.
You are a beloved friend of our Lord, who bade us set this table.
Sit. Relax. Take a morsel of bread, a sip of wine.
Renew your spirit, before you go forth to work again.

“I DIDN’T EVEN KNOW I WAS SICK”

Adam Thomas
Virginia Theological Seminary

Luke 6:17-26

Imagine with me an entry from the journal of Caleb of Jerusalem, the fifth day of the sixth month in the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius:

The pen shakes in my hand as I begin to write. The hairs on the back of my neck are still standing up. My heart is still pounding in my chest. I feel like I have just sprinted a race, but instead of being tired, I am refreshed, I am renewed, I am reborn! Today...Today, I was healed! I was healed by a man named Jesus from Nazareth. I was healed and I did not even know I was sick.

This is what happened. I was returning to Jerusalem from a business trip in Sepphoris. I just purchased a new quarry in that region, and I needed to finish up some paperwork and oversee operations for a few days. The foremen seemed capable enough, and I expected a return on my investment in the near future. My business is booming even though I only have one customer—the Romans buy my rock and stone like it’s going out of style. Sure, they take my goods at a reduced rate, but they buy so much that I still come out ahead.

But I am getting off-track. I was returning to Jerusalem from Sepphoris, when my caravan got caught up in a huge crowd of people. I lashed out with my whip trying to clear a path, but to no avail. I stopped fighting the current of people and turned my camel. Looking east off the road, I saw a smaller group of people picking their way down the mountainside. Who are they to be so popular, I thought. My curiosity piqued, I began following the crowd into a sparse valley that wandered into the foothills of the mountain. One man seemed to be getting the most attention. The frontrunners of the crowd that I was now a part of reached him and began touching him. His companions grabbed the frontrunners by their tunics and pulled them off him. But more of the crowd pressed in. The man motioned to his companions to stop their futile attempt at crowd control. He moved through the crowd touching people one by one. The jostling and pushing stopped as if everyone in the crowd had taken and held a deep breath all at once.

Then, he began to speak. I was still too far away to catch his first words. I came closer and asked a boy what the man was talking about. “Blessings, sir, blessings for all!” came the answer in a loud whisper. I grinned, thinking about all my blessings—my booming business, the large breakfast I ate at my cliff-top apartments in Sepphoris, the respect I had earned among fellow businessmen in Jerusalem. I stopped counting, realizing the man had paused. The crowd leaned in, expecting more.

And he looked right at me. I felt my stomach turn. I tried to hold his gaze, but it was like standing too close to a fire. I looked away, sweating, breathing hard. I could feel his eyes still on me, searching me, scorching me. He spoke again: “But woe,” he said, “to you who are rich for you have received your consolation.” Woe to you who are full now. Woe to you when all speak well of you. Each phrase scalded me like oil that leaps from a frying pan. No, he can’t mean me, I thought. I follow the law, I lead a good life—and God has blessed me with an abundance of . . . But, in my mind—or in a place deeper than my mind—a small voice, barely audible, whispered, “He is talking to you.”

I slid off my camel and pressed the reins into the hands of the boy I had spoken with earlier. In a haze, I took a weak-kneed step forward, then another and another. The man’s lips were still moving, yet I could not hear him. But I knew what he was saying, as if his words bypassed my ears and penetrated my heart directly. He was talking about love and forgiveness, even for the most unlikely people. I continued my slow walk towards him, gently pushing through pockets of people. I noticed a welt on a woman’s arm and wondered if I had made the cut with my whip when I was fighting against the crowd on the road. All of a sudden, I gagged, horrorstruck at how I could have thoughtlessly lashed out at these people. The woman looked at me, concern written on her face, and put a reassuring hand on my shoulder. I steadied myself on her arm. The man finished speaking and the crowd let out its collective held breath. I took another step forward, and the woman continued to support me.

The man looked at me again, and again I felt the heat rise in my face. But this time, the heat was like entering a warm house on a bitterly cold night. I felt strength returning to my limbs. I took a final step, stumbled, and my knees came down in the sharp gravel. The man caught my arm and pulled me to my feet. The woman, his companions, and the great crowd hovered in the obscurity outside our connection. I felt like my entire world, my whole being, all my life was made for this one moment. “What do you seek?” he said.

I opened my lips, no sound came out, and I closed my mouth. My mind raced. “What do you seek,” he said again, “Don’t think, just answer.”

I opened my mouth again, and words spilled out. “I have all I’ve ever wanted, I thought I was blessed, but everything you said was a curse to me... Lord, please give me your blessing.”

I looked up into his eyes, and they smiled. His mouth spread into a grin and he laughed. “Good answer,” he said. “True, you are blessed by the standards of this world. But my kingdom is not of this world. Know that I love you even though I condemn your priorities. Know that I love you even though your life is one of misplaced devotion and unwitting idolatry. Know that I love you even though your full life contributes to the empty lives of others. And know that because I love you, you can change. You are healed, my child. Now, what are you going to do?”

I opened my lips, no sound came out. “What are you going to do,” he said again, “Don’t think, just answer.”

“I will follow you, Lord. But,” I stammered, “I don’t know how.”

He let go of my arm and passed me back to the woman who had supported me on my walk to him. As he turned to greet the next person, he said, “You have your whole life to figure that out. But remember, my child, nothing in all creation can keep my love from you. I will be with you always.”

We began to walk away, and, even though we got farther away from Jesus, I still felt like he was standing right in front of me. Through streaming tears, I glanced at the woman’s arm. The welt was gone. Noticing that she was pregnant, I offered her my camel, which she gladly accepted. I thanked the boy for holding the reigns, and helped the woman up into the saddle. We began slowly walking down the road, each lost, I imagine, in the same thought.

As I close this journal entry, I think about what tomorrow brings. I am ecstatic and terrified at the same time. How will I change my life? The small voice returns, whispering, “Your life has already changed. You have been healed. You have been blessed. Now be that healing, be that blessing in the world.”

“WHAT IT TAKES TO BE RICH”

Rohani Weger
Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest

*Proper 13, Year C: Ecclesiastes 1: 12-14, 2: 1-7, 11, 18-23;
Colossians 3: 12-17; Luke 12: 13-21*

How much would it take for you to feel rich?

- A winning lotto ticket?
- A substantial raise?
- Poorer friends to compare yourself to?

What would it take for you to feel satisfied?

- Being able to provide a certain standard of living for your family?
- Being debt free?

Our readings today contrast several attitudes towards money, and life, and what's important.

The book of Ecclesiastes gives us a glimpse of a prince – tradition links it to King Solomon. Even if he isn't, the Teacher (as he calls himself) is someone powerful, rich, influential. He snaps his fingers and it's done.

It reminds me of a news story I read about North Korea. In honor of the leader Kim Jong Il, a red begonia has been cultivated specifically to bloom in winter on the leader's birthday in February. They call it the “Kimjongilia” – Now, I am all for beautiful flowers. I dated a florist for a while and I loved the exquisite bi-colored roses he would send me. However it seems to me rather extravagant when the country is one of the poorest in the world, to be pouring money into botanical research.

“Not so!” says the prince of Ecclesiastes. He has gardens throughout his palaces, country houses with vineyards, slaves to do his every bidding. He sees as his goal in life to try everything possible – just to record what it is like! Yet he wonders - is this all there is to life?

In our Gospel passage today, a person asks Jesus to arbitrate their family's

inheritance. Perhaps the will had been the final blow in his deteriorating relationship with his parents, perhaps the parents by-passed the rights of the eldest son because the younger one was more responsible. Perhaps he felt his brother had enough already and should "share the wealth." Certainly, it was not unheard of at this time to ask rabbis to interpret inheritance laws. However, Jesus interprets the problem as something else altogether and tells a parable of someone who is, well, quite satisfied with his life:

There once was a successful landowner celebrating after an especially successful year. Surely no one would begrudge him a moment of self-satisfaction over a job successfully done. He needs more storage so he decides to tear down his barns so that he can build BIGGER ONES. "Look what I have done!" he tells his soul. Yet God calls him foolish.

So, is this really about money?

The Prince of Ecclesiastes, after trying everything, does eventually "get it" He ends his book saying "The conclusion when all has been heard is fear God and keep His commandments because this applies to every person (including himself), for God will bring every act to judgment." But it sounds more like a grudging admission than a revelation that transforms him.

The land of the rich man produces abundantly. But what brought about this success - the rich man's hard work or that of his tenants? He has just collected on the hard work of others. Does he even consider rewarding them?

And this person who would have Jesus shame his brother into sharing the inheritance. Jesus refuses to get involved and rightly so. Both siblings are in danger of putting money over their family relationships. Both siblings are standing under the judgment of God. "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God."

How does one become rich towards God? Paul reminds the Colossians where their treasure lies.

"As God's chosen ones - holy and beloved - that right there is enough - God has chosen us and loves us. But there is more.

What is the well dressed Christian wearing these days? Picture a stunning

evening dress of compassion, Velvet robes of kindness, a well cut suit - humility, And for everyday comfortable wear: meekness and patience. And over all the cloak of love. What a wardrobe!

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts - rather than the worries of the world. Seeing today's challenges in the light of eternity gives us a different perspective!

And be . . . thankful: To God, to others. I love that bumper sticker: "If you can read this, thank a teacher." Everything we have is made possible because of others. Be thankful.

Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly! God can use anything to speak to us of course, but when we take time to read and study the Word of God, we find ourselves remembering familiar words . . . just when we need it.

Paul finishes with the same conclusion as the Prince of Ecclesiastes - but with a different attitude: Whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God the Father through him. What is the difference? Perspective. For the Prince following God's path was confining, but he realizes that even he will have to give an account for his actions. For Paul, serving Christ was a privilege that he thanked God for.

So, what would it take for you to be rich? Quite a few of us have dreams of that winning lotto ticket but all we know financial stability is more likely a result of hard work and responsible planning. It's not too different spiritually either. Anyone at any socio-economic level can receive the riches Paul describes. But unless we incorporate them into our lives, they are useless.

What would it take for God to call you rich?

“A SERMON DELIVERED”

at St. John the Baptist, Granby, Colo.
by M. Catherine Volland
The Iliff School of Theology, Denver, Colo.

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

What a great time in Jesus' ministry we read about in today's Gospel! We are about mid-way in Luke's retelling of Jesus public years, and his work is in full flower. Everywhere he goes, people are eager to catch a glimpse or hear a word. In fact, in the chapter right before the one we read today, Herod himself tries to meet Jesus, but can't get an appointment.

In today's lesson, Jesus appoints seventy disciples. Disciples – learners like us – they were ordinary people eager to spread the word about Jesus.

Jesus gives them some simple guidelines: live simply and with contentment, wish Peace wherever you go, and remember, go two by two.

The seventy have great success. When they return, we can practically hear the giddiness in their voice. “Whoa! ‘Even the demons submit to us!’”

All of us here are disciples, learners, followers of Christ. It is our inheritance through Baptism, and we all try to invest our inheritance by living into the Good News, as the faithful have always done. How would any of us have the courage – indeed, how would we even have the idea – of becoming disciples of Jesus, were it not for this great communion of saints who have gone before us.

I want to tell you about a time when I was seven or eight. Like most kids, I admired my older siblings, in my case my older brother Philip. Phil played Little League baseball. The truth was, he wasn't very good, but he was doing something I couldn't do, and I was in awe. He would gather his gear, get into uniform, go the ball-field, and become something special. I especially admired his uniform shirt. Heavy cotton flannel, creamy white with bold, black numbers, soft to the touch.

When he outgrew his shirt, he gave it to me. I was dazzled. I loved that shirt. It wasn't about playing baseball, it was about the shirt. Fine, and soft, and

unlike anything else in my closet. It was as if all the good energy, all the strength and fine qualities of my big brother could rub off on me when I touched that shirt. I was a little more like him when I wore that shirt, more confident, more grown up, a little sturdier just by being wrapped in this soft flannel.

Retelling the Gospel stories of discipleship is in some ways like slipping into that shirt: we feel its comfort, we picture what the heroes who went before us were like, we are a little more ready to live into their dreams and achievements.

Of course, some parts of the shirt scratch a bit, like the fact we know that there are tough parts to being a disciple. Jesus describes an uncertain and unglamorous life. Not everyone we invite will come, not everyone we talk to will listen, not every prayer for healing will see physical results. Jesus tells them there are going to be times all you can do is shake the dust of an unwelcoming town off your sandals and move on. We all know the feeling.

I wonder if in those days, people expected more out of discipleship, or even more of their God. But I do notice one thing for sure – and that is the extraordinary generosity of these early disciples. They left their ordinary lives, their livelihoods, their families, their hometowns, their routine, their pets, and they went off, trusting in the word of Jesus. All they could take with themselves was his advice: be content to live simply, spread Peace wherever you go, and don't try to do it alone.

But it was enough. Maybe they remembered the words of God recorded by the prophet Isaiah, which they would have recited in synagogue and we recite in Morning Prayer:

“For as rain and snow fall from the heavens
and return not again but water the earth,
bringing forth life and giving growth,
seed for sowing and bread for eating,
so is my word that goes forth from my mouth;
it will not return to me empty;
but it will accomplish that which I have purposed,
and prosper in that for which I sent it.”

These disciples knew they were the rain, sent by heaven to bring forth life and growth. They knew they would accomplish God's purpose and prosper in that for which God sent them. And I hope we know the same. We are disciples

every time we live into our Baptismal covenant. We know we are disciples when we buy a bar of soap and drop them in that basket in the entryway for the food bank. We know we are disciples when we teach children or visit prisoners. We are disciples when we pray faithfully for our loved ones – and for our enemies. We are disciples when we believe in forgiveness. We are disciples when we welcome strangers, without asking to see their documentation.

We are disciples when we believe God has great things in store for us, even when we can't see them for ourselves.

We accomplish God's purpose and prosper in that for which God sent us.

How did those first disciples dare have the courage, the courage to be laborers in the harvest and go out "like lambs in the midst of wolves". Maybe some of their courage came from being able to see Jesus face to face and chat with him at night over the fire. Maybe some of their courage came from not knowing, as we do, that their journey led to the cross.

But there is something else we know too. Their journey also led to the Eucharist.

In the Eucharist, we don't just remember Christ. It is not a re-enactment of what happened long ago. It's not even a time when we get to share something with Jesus, like my brother shared his shirt, as if to feel rather special. It is Jesus sharing his real presence. When we take Jesus at his word, "This is my body," we take in Jesus' real self, take in his humanity, take in his divinity. God shared our humanity that we might share God's divinity. That's why Jesus matters. That's why the Eucharist matters.

And that's why, as disciples, we dare to believe we can go about God's business, relying on Jesus' plainspoken advice: be satisfied with living simply, spread Peace wherever you go, and do ministry, one with another.

Looking at Jesus' words in the original text, we can tell from the Greek verb used that when Jesus said, "I give you authority," it was meant as a permanent gift. Nonetheless, we didn't become disciples by re-telling their stories, anymore than I became a ballplayer by wearing a hand-me-down shirt. We become disciples, again and again, by following the Gospel call. And it is the Eucharist that

makes discipleship possible: God interwoven with humankind, and we with God. That is why we pray in our Eucharistic Prayer:

Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name.

LOOKING AGAIN AT TEACHING HOMILETICS

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The teaching of homiletics in our Episcopal seminaries is ready for an update and a revision. In spite of the renewed emphasis on preaching in the church dating from the mid-70's, some of our seminary graduates are discovering themselves less well prepared for the week by week crafting and delivering of effective sermons than they might be. The problem suggests that insufficient time and emphasis are being devoted to homiletics instruction and supervised preaching practicums in our seminaries.

Although our eleven accredited and residential seminaries in the Episcopal Church value homiletics and give preaching an enthusiastic affirmation, the subject has always had some difficulty gaining the attention it deserves in theological curriculums. The problem isn't that there has been no response to the revival of teaching preaching. Rather, the responses of recent past decades seem to be over and development of homiletics programs today has become somewhat stymied.

The revival began in 1965 when a few teachers of preaching across several mainline denominations were struggling in their seminaries to keep their programs alive. They gathered to form a new society called the Academy of Homiletics, not only to promote more and better preaching courses in seminaries, but to initiate defining homiletics as a new discipline and learning from each other how best to teach it. The publication of these professors' short paperbacks marked the development of the movement from Fred Craddock's *As One Without Authority* for the next twenty years. Their work began to be widely used in seminary classrooms, and their effect nurtured an improvement in the shape of teaching homiletics, as well, of course, as in preaching itself.

In spite of three decades of energetic development in homiletics, we appear to have arrived at a plateau. The new-found energy so strong up through the 90's seems to be waning, and the time has come for us to reexamine how well we are doing in teaching preaching.

The Episcopal Preaching Foundation, a group which exists to promote and support preaching in the Episcopal Church, recently informally surveyed chairpersons of search committees whose vacant cures are listed on the church's nationally published Positions Open Bulletin. We asked, "What emphasis are you placing on the preaching skill of the clergy person you will choose as rector of your congregation?" The chairperson at Saint Martin's Church, Williamsburg, Virginia, responded, "We are placing considerable importance on the preaching skill of the rector we choose. I feel confident that we would not hire an ineffective preacher as rector even if the candidate were very strong in other areas." From Saint Timothy's Church, Greenville, North Carolina, we received this response: "Preaching effectiveness is of paramount importance and is the PRIMARY consideration for our discernment process. . . . If a priest cannot provide an engaging sermon, then strengths in other areas will not warrant reducing the importance of preaching effectiveness." We learned from the committee at Saint Gabriel's, Oakwood, Georgia, "A lot of emphasis will be placed on preaching and sermon skills of prospective candidates during our interview process. . . . We see effective preaching as a must and something we cannot compromise . . . as dictated to us via the results of our Parish Questionnaire." We repeatedly learn from our lay people that preaching is very important among them.

We also informally surveyed seminarians who had just attended the 2005 session of the Foundation's Preaching Excellence Program, a five day annual conference for Episcopal seminarians at which they preach and receive professional critique. We asked them to comment on the importance they ascribed to the homiletics instruction they were receiving in their seminaries and whether they considered it to be sufficient.

One student responded, "I place a high level of importance on the teaching of preaching and the inclusion of homiletics in my M.Div. curriculum. The courses that I took in homiletics helped me to integrate my biblical and theological studies with the place where 'the rubber hits the road' with parishioners and the people that I will serve." He went on to say, "I like the emphasis of homiletics in the 2nd year, but it would be nice if there were more opportunities to take courses and practice preaching in the third year of seminary."

Another student wrote, "Having entered seminary with depth in literature and rhetoric, homiletics courses have been less critical to my seminary education than those areas about which I knew little before I arrived, such as liturgics and ecclesiology." Then she added this thoughtful observation: "The program at my

school would do well to more fully integrate field education preaching with classroom lecture and evaluation. We need to learn by doing more actual preaching and receiving feedback not only from our peers and professor, but also from laity.”

A young woman gave this answer: “In response to the importance of the teaching of preaching and the inclusion of homiletics in my M.Div. curriculum, I believe that preaching is one of the most important aspects in preparation for ministry. This is of course to be combined with all those courses that help us to form the theology that we preach, but the preaching aspect is so very important—indeed the most pastoral moment we have with the flock in which we are called to serve.” Responding to the second question, whether she thought the emphasis on preaching at her seminary was sufficient, she said, “I believe there should be an increased emphasis on preaching. I believe the passion for preaching needs to be stirred so that those preparing for ministry truly believe in the words they are speaking in a homily, and that the message of how very important the Good News is would be conveyed clearly! Preaching is a real gift that we are allowed to offer, and I believe it would be extremely helpful to have a stronger emphasis on preaching in our seminary—again emphasizing and inciting passion for it.”

None of the students responded with disrespect or dissatisfaction with the curriculum he or she was experiencing, but most of the respondents wanted a greater emphasis on their seminary’s preaching program.

Generally speaking, homiletics courses include study of scripture and exegesis, the crafting of sermons that make the biblical message hearable and understandable, exhortation of congregations to respond to the gospel in their own personal faith and outreach, and reaching those who can be brought into the church’s fellowship through the preached word. The primary means of bringing this teaching to fruition among seminary students is frequent preaching to skilled persons who are prepared to give strong, helpful critique. The student preaches in class to peers, in seminary chapel services, and in field education congregations. Merely preaching over and over does not insure growth in skill; the feedback component from trained listeners is critical for the process to be fruitful. The measure of excellence the student can achieve as an effective preacher is related to the frequency with which this round of preaching and critique can be accomplished during the seminarian’s career. In other words, the more times students preach for skillful evaluation, the more accomplished preachers they will become.

A preaching group might include seven or eight students who gather with their professor to hear a colleague preach. They have been instructed in how to give helpful feedback and how to couch their honest observations in language that is helpful and supportive to the preacher. They have learned how to give negative as well as positive feedback in constructive ways. Video taping the sermon can be helpful in this process, not only to give the preacher a better idea of how he or she communicates, but also to provide a check on the accuracy of the feedback given by listeners. The preacher is encouraged to use the information received in preparation for the next sermon.

If the same group gives critique after each sermon, then they can report the progress they have noted and give encouragement and support to the preacher. The subtle clue to the value of the group evaluation process is that the students giving critique are themselves learning about their own preaching as they observe what is effective and helpful in the preaching of others.

There remain some who believe that homiletics can be taught by any priest, and who solve the problem by allowing a neighborhood “good preacher” to become an adjunct professor to accomplish the task. This is quite likely a mistaken remedy. Further, it is best no longer to assign preaching classes to busy faculty members in other fields to take care of it in their spare time. These alternatives are the way homiletics was handled up into the 70s. Teaching homiletics has become a specialized skill, and special training is needed for those who will do it well. The research and writing of the last thirty years have shown that the focus has shifted from what a sermon “ought” to say, what the appropriate pulpit message has always been, to how to say it. The change in how people listen in today’s culture is effecting the changing shape of sermon-crafting. The preacher errs if so much attention is paid to the message that how to deliver it is neglected. Not every preacher is ready to teach in this new environment.

All of us experience a barrage of information coming at us from a variety of sources. Television news and advertising, for example, are communications professionally designed by skillful men and women who have learned how to hold our attention and to convince us to listen even when our instincts tell us we aren’t interested. The average listeners among us keep working at screening out what we don’t want to hear in order to avoid being overloaded with unnecessary information. Communicating to us has come to be a professional undertaking with many different specific roles, and all point toward getting through our defenses and persuading and informing us.

Preachers can learn a good deal from these professionals. We have similar goals with respect to communicating the Gospel. We may reasonably assume that those who come into our churches on Sunday mornings are there because they want to hear a saving and supporting Gospel message. We may assume that worshipers want to listen, but that listening isn't easy these days. We have learned from the feedback given preachers in the classroom that these faithful worshipers are accustomed to turning off any communication coming at them that is not a consequential message specifically designed to draw them into listening.

The well-written sermon is crafted with all this in mind. The course in homiletics is not a course in what to preach about. The rest of the curriculum is where the subject matter of preaching is learned. Homiletics has a different role. Ordinands need to leave seminary having been steered by a competent professor especially trained to coach them in how to speak the pulpit message so that it will be heard. New writings in homiletics focus on this contemporary theory of preaching. A good course in homiletics is a course in effective communication.

A good summary of what contributes to an effective sermon comes from an author addressing both Roman Catholics and Protestants:

When people are asked to critique preaching they have heard, reliably they usually report quite similar things. For instance, to the question "What has caused bad preaching you have heard to be bad?" people will typically respond that bad homilies are bad because they don't deliver one simple message; ramble on and on; are either too abstract or too simple; are non-scriptural; don't relate to real life issues; emerge only out of the preacher's interests, ideologies, or life issues; have too many unrelated points; don't suggest a plan of action. Conversely, when pressed to identify those features which have made good preaching effective, people often reply that good homilies are good because they are to the point; address issues of critical importance to the lives of hearers; are scriptural; suggest a mission or plan of action as a result of the homily; feature a disciplined and reasonable use of time and end when they are finished.

None of this ignores the importance of the preacher's personal spiritual strength. Study of scripture and personal worship and prayer are always undergirding the careful preacher in the pulpit task. While the strategy of teaching seminarians and their preaching strategy as ordained persons may sound like a secular enterprise, the seminary environment and the homiletics classroom are concerned with what we so widely call today spiritual formation. Carefully designed

preaching aimed at getting the message heard is not a trick or a gimmick. Rather, secular tools are being used for a sacred purpose.

We at the Foundation continued our survey by asking the homiletics faculty at each of the eleven seminaries for a description of their program to be sent to us by e-mail. All eleven of the seminaries responded, and a collation of the data was sent to each respondent.

The data showed the following breakdown of the number of homiletics courses taught at each of the nine responding seminaries:

One seminary requires four courses

One seminary requires three courses

Two seminaries requires two courses

One seminary teaches three required quarters

(1½ semesters, or the equivalent of 1½ courses)

Five seminaries require one required course

One seminary has no required courses.

(NB—This response indicates that “most students take one or two.”)

In other words, five seminaries teach only one homiletics course.

We learned that in the main students preach only one to four times in class, the predominant number being three times. One seminary requires eight sermons preached in class; one seminary requires only one sermon in class.

All seminaries require at least one sermon to be preached at worship—seven require one sermon, three require two sermons, and one requires three. In almost every case, this number of sermons is supplemented by preaching at the field education site. It is not clear that all these sermons receive skilled critique and feedback.

All the seminaries except one have electives in preaching to give students who want more instruction a means for receiving it; one seminary has no electives. When there is an elective, one seminary has 70% participation, four seminaries have 50% participation, and three seminaries have between 10% and 20% participation.

Two seminaries have two full time homiletics professors; four seminaries have one full time homiletics professor. One seminary has an adjunct who comes in to teach homiletics. A second seminary appears to have this arrangement, but

the response is not completely clear.

This data seems to indicate that the emphasis on homiletics in our seminaries has moved forward markedly since the desperate shape into which it had fallen during the 70s. At the same time we are learning that teaching homiletics is in need of more curriculum time and more emphasis. When the data is assembled, the emerging picture shows an uneven landscape. While some seminaries may have lively programs in preaching, others give little time and emphasis. All need to reevaluate what is going on, especially with respect to giving more curriculum time to preaching or more opportunities for students to preach and receive critique either in or out of the classroom.

Two questions seem to suggest themselves from the data:

1) Is homiletics integrated, not just into the curriculum, but into the formation of the priestly life in a way that encourages practice, enthusiasm, and conversation throughout the seminary career and beyond, or 2) Is homiletics taught as a necessary practicum, a component of the core curriculum not particularly well integrated into the formation of the ordained person? Homiletics can thrive in the curriculum only if the faculty supports it with the same sense of its importance as it supports theology, scripture, history, and ethics.

To be truthful about a hope for a better Episcopal Church homiletics program in our eleven seminaries, a least four obstacles need to be overcome. First, there is a shortage of trained faculty. Seminaries seeking faculty in homiletics frequently have difficulty locating able candidates.

Second, homiletics as a discipline attracts few doctoral candidates to prepare for seminary teaching. Some see it as a field requiring less academic challenge than others, or perhaps less employment opportunity. They are unaware that extensive work in Scripture, Greek and Hebrew, rhetoric, and the history of preaching are among the strong requirements in advanced degree homiletics programs. When Professor Craddock first approached the administration of Emory University to invite their consideration of a Ph.D. in homiletics, he was told that the University could not give "a degree in public speaking."

Third, it is difficult for some theological faculties to surrender classroom time for what they sometimes consider to be a just another practicum. While this is understandable in some measure, it is clear that the people of the church expect better preaching than they are getting and that they look to seminaries to provide it. Further, faculties need to recognize and enjoy the fact that their own components

of the seminary curriculum are reinforced when students come to use them in their preaching.

Fourth, the addition of homiletics faculty, and often space and electronic equipment for teaching, cost money, and some of our seminaries are in a difficult position to provide it. As one seminary dean recently commented, the One Percent program has never really worked, and deans are reminded annually that the Episcopal Church is delinquent in providing money to support theological education.

However, at the same time that these problems are being considered, both the church at large, and our eleven seminaries as well, need to hold in their planning the demonstrated fact that effective speaking from the pulpit is a basic tool of the competent priest. Preaching is the primary contact people in the pew have with their clergy and their church. No other agency or educational facility is prepared to train clergy to preach. No survey can tell us what we lose when we allow ordained clergy to lead their congregations with less than excellence in their homiletical training. Nor is there any estimate of the cost of any seminary's allowing its graduates to go forth without instilling in them the need for learning throughout their careers about the art of preaching. While not the only concern of our seminary administrations and faculty, it is nonetheless clear that excellence in the teaching of preaching urgently deserves a place at the top of our list of required academic emphases.