

5th Sunday in Lent (Seminary Sunday)  
Redeemer Lutheran Church - Milwaukee  
March 31, 1974  
Pastor Peter R. Martyn

"SPREAD THE WORD"

"When the time came, the (man) sent a servant to the tenants, that they should give him some of the fruit of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him, and sent him away empty-handed." (Luke 20:10)

"Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the Church of the Lord which he obtained with his own blood." (Acts 20:28)

Most of us have at one time or another looked forward to something. Maybe it was a special day - maybe a unique opportunity - maybe a once-in-a-lifetime reward. Whatever, we've wanted that moment to be glorious - to really shine - to stand out. And then the day comes. First the rain dampens the day. Then a flat tire along the way. After arriving, that special person who came for the event gets sick. Finally, as we are about to accept the award - we reach into the vest pocket or purse - Lo and behold, no acceptance speech!

And so, what we wanted to be a good-news-day finds fulfillment as a bad-news-day. I thank God this hasn't happened to me YET on a Sunday morning.

But this IS THE WAY I feel about the Gospel text for this day. Today - Seminary Sunday - I was hoping for a gloriously affirming and uplifting message. Instead, we find one of warning . . . a proclamation of judgment. Instead of a text which tells us HOW GREAT WE ARE, ARE AS GOD'S PEOPLE, this parable reveals us as often shameful and violent caretakers.

What a human disappointment for me today! But what a divine reminder for all of us everyday!

Yes, if you're anything like me, you'd prefer some other parable. For we all enjoy much more hearing the ACCEPTING FATHER imagery in last week's parable--yet we need reminders continually of our ACCOUNTABILITY and RESPONSIBILITY as accepted children. The narrative before us seeks to accomplish this aim.

Although it is believed that the early church embellished these words of Jesus, nevertheless, the point clearly emerges even through the allegorical detail. God faithfully sends his messengers to those he has entrusted with his vineyard -- that is, his whole revelation of himself. But these servants or messengers are shamefully and often violently treated.

Stated differently, God gives us - his people - a vineyard . . . namely, life, a society, and a gracious way to live out our relationships in that created order. He gives us these things with the hope THAT WE will sustain, preserve, and share them. He sends messengers to remind us that these things ARE NOT our possessions. They are entrusted gifts - to be used + shared responsibly.

But TOO OFTEN we would rather possess life and all these things. And to do this, we must gag both the messenger and the message.

Most of us have some knowledge of specific instances of this stifling activity in our Judeo-Christian heritage. We know how Jeremiah and the other prophets continually faced the threat of death. The fate of John the Baptist, Saints Peter and Stepehn, and other early Christian disciples offers further evidence. Similar ~~were~~ the termination of many early church fathers. And of course, we all know intimately the response to Jesus' earthly ministry.  
of God's tenants

So it is that this parable is not an easy one to hear. The landlord gives the tenants a vineyard - i.e., he gives them a foundation to sustain their lives. He offers them the freedom to develop that sustaining foundation in many ways. But he remains in relationship to them - he sends his servant to proclaim and receive his rightful return from the land.

The medium may be different today, but the message is the same. God gives us the vineyard-- life, relationships, and the undergirding love for all these. This we call God's gift of grace. But he does not leave us there. We do not have faith in a watchmaker-God, who sets the world in motion and then lets it run its own course.

Our God gives us the vineyard - the gift of grace, and then sends us messengers, who hold us accountable and responsible for that gift. That is the call of our ministry - we are the guardians of God's grace. God continues to send us servants to remind us of the tremendous responsibility we have as tenants of his gifts. At the same time, he also calls us to be fellow-messengers -- disciples who have the courage to serve notice on the irresponsible use of God's gifts.

That means that as God's people we live with at least three tensions. First, as messengers - we still are faced daily with the risk of being shamed, rejected, or even violently treated when we call God's people into accountability. A spokesman for God must make clear that NO ONE has ownership of God's gifts.

The gospel and the whole creation was given that it might be shared RESPONSIBLY with all people who need it -- AND THAT INCLUDES EVERYONE. This is the message, and its mouth-piece is not limited to pastor-messengers. Obviously, pastors can be the servants - but oft-times God's messengers are NOT WEARING clerical collars.

For God often sends just THAT person who has a very real need TO TASTE THE FRUITS from the vineyard. And this servant may simply be a hungry stranger. Or this spokesman may be one of our children. And he or she may be saying: "Give me just a morsel of your undivided time so that I will really know of your desire to share God's love."

Or maybe the spokesman is a parent <sup>accountability</sup> or spouse, calling another family member into a life-giving relationship with the others. Yes, or maybe today the ~~servant~~ is a whole nation, calling its leaders to be honest and responsible with the powerful gift of authority that they have been given.

Whatever, and whoever, the messenger always runs the risk of being shamefully treated by the guardians of the vineyard. <sup>carrying God's message is no easy calling.</sup> ~~But as~~ God reminds us today of the innumerable gifts he has given us - he desires that we will be true guardians - i.e., concerned caretakers of his ~~possessions.~~ <sup>also</sup>

Our second tension, then, is aroused in our call to be true guardians - responsible caretakers. Let's just consider what this means in terms of a simple thing like church membership. Many feel such membership offers them special privileges and status. But in viewing ourselves as caretakers in the vineyard, we soon recognize that membership offers something quite different--namely, RESPONSIBILITY.

We really must become aware of this as members of the American church because we tend to be vulnerable toward irresponsibility. ~~Since~~ so many of us live comfortably, we are tempted to ~~pattern~~ the church into a similar order -- into a social or fraternal club.

And so ~~God must remind us daily that our sufficiency is from him - he calls us to respond according to the richness of our vineyard. He knows the church in this country has been blessed with his most fruitful laborers.~~

And so he <sup>COMMISSIONS</sup> us as responsible caretakers to feed (whole) Church of the Lord which he obtained with his own blood."

I know only too well how this call from God creates a tension within us. For as pastors, we have our own way of sometimes ascribing to ourselves special status within the church. Our temptation is to become little gods - to dispense God's grace as if it were our love rather than his through us. The distinction may seem small. - But when we fail to make the distinction - when we allow servanthood to mean special status, then we've opened the ecclesiastical doors to arrogance and self-righteousness.

As pastors and people - yes, as responsible ~~overseers~~, God calls us today to ask ourselves whose interests we are serving. He asks us to inventory our talents and gifts. . . and then he asks us to use these gifts - none of which we own - to use them responsibly by sharing them with others. We are called to be laborers in the vineyard -- workers who will not ALLOW ANYONE to suffer malnutrition because we have the resources to feed the church.

Finally, the last tension is really a relief. It is the good news which even transcends the parable. In the parable, the "beloved son" is killed - thrown out of the vineyard. Obviously, the parable wants us to recognize this servant as Jesus himself. And we know that he suffered a tragic rejection as God's most beloved servant. But our Lord's life did not end in a pool of blood - the resurrection offers us hope even WHEN we have been shamefully violent to God's intention for us.

This means that God will not be frustrated by us. Christ's presence lives. The shameful treatment of one messenger will not defeat God. He will send another. He will continue to spread His Word through his never-ending

chain of servants. That's Good News. Our ministry here in this community - or wherever we may be - will never be dependent upon ANY SINGLE SERVANT. God's grace continues to live even with the loss or rejection of a servant.

His love continues to LIVE and SPREAD because he sends a replacement. . . . and that might be any one of us. For he has entrusted each of us NOT ONLY to be custodians, but also to be messengers. And so if I should fail or be rejected *in my attempts* to alert the tenants to their responsibility --- then he and I are counting on you to fill the vacancy.

And he's especially counting on other pastors to respond to ~~his~~ leadership *call*. . . . not only to be messengers, but also laboring workers in the vineyard. I hope and pray that God's call for such pastoral leaders will find a response from some of the young people in this congregation.

And in the meantime, let us pray that he can count on all of us to be responsible messengers and ~~caretakers~~ *of support* in the vineyard. That's our hope. That's our deliverance from ~~destroying ourselves~~. That's spreading the Word. Yes, that's feeding the church wherever two or three are gathered in his name.

Amen.

*as well as a response from all of us for those faithfully studying for the ministry.*

V WEDNESDAY IN LENT

Redeemer Lutheran Church - Milwaukee

April 3, 1974

"BEYOND DIPLOMACY . . . THE CROSS"

"So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas; and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified."

Mark 15:15

Webster gives as a second meaning for the word "diplomacy:" "the artful management in securing advantages without arousing hostility." (Repeat) Successful survival today in most professions is HIGHLY dependent upon this art. The parish ministry can claim no exemption from DAILY EMPLOYMENT of this ingredient for successful interaction.

It is often assumed that the application of diplomacy is hypocritical and evil because it sometimes involves hidden agendas. Surely there are abuses to personal diplomacy. We all know where innocent victims have been conned by super-slick, fast-talkers.

Yet, if we're really honest with ourselves, we know its constructive use OFTEN saves hurt feelings and prevents serious misunderstanding. To this day I still hear negative comments directed at former interns and pastors of this congregation because they were "too direct" - because they were "too outspoken." In short, they may have occasionally FALLEN BELOW the unwritten requirements for diplomacy.

Yes, we've all fallen victim **to this** so-called misdemeanor at one time or another. We all know how we ourselves - or someone else in the congregation, city, or nation has created a tense scene DUE TO A LACK OF DIPLOMACY OR TACT.

So it goes without further statement - ~~often~~ <sup>often</sup> diplomacy is ~~very necessary~~ / some issues are NOT WORTH antagonizing another person or splitting a harmonious body of people - *due to a lack of tact.*

But as Hubert Beck states in his commentary - "Diplomacy loses its value at given points. Evil is a case in point, for you simply cannot 'artfully manage to secure advantage' over open, forthright evil. It will not be bargained with. It will run rough-shod over anyone or anything that gets between it and its goal."

And so we encounter the gospel text before us this day. Pilate had run head-on into an aroused people possessed by evil. He was a trained and professional diplomat - and so he tried the diplomacy of TRUTHFUL BARGAINING with the people.

In the Lukan parallel to Mark's text, we read: "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him; neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Behold, nothing deserving death has been done by him; I will therefore chastise him and release him."

But would the possessed crowd listen to this? No way! They ~~cry~~ all the louder: Crucify him! The diplomat, Pontious Pilate, learned quickly that "truth does not win out if it tries to bargain with evil. Evil can twist and warp truth till it is unrecognizable."

*Pilate employs the diplomatic techniques - he*  
Pilate appeals to the authorities and rulers - he tries to play Barrabbas against Jesus -- he proclaims that he can find no fault worthy of death in Jesus -- all these attempts of "artful management to secure an advantage in order to avoid hostility." But evil responds all the more incited: 'Crucify him.'

"So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd" and I repeat - "wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas; and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified."



*And so we see,*

"Diplomacy" according to its cardinal principles must finally "satisfy the crowd," and with that satisfaction, diplomacy becomes a kiss of death.

So, what's the point here? What's new in this message? What's new about evil being bad?

*destructive*  
This message makes no claim of being NEW to this age. The theme is old yet still too hot to handle - evil cannot be artfully managed. It will be ~~the~~ VICTOR if it is toyed-with by a "nice-guy" approach.

Jesus was more than a "nice-guy" *wearing a smile when faced by evil.* He quite UNDIPLOMATICALLY made a shambles of the temple profaned by moneychangers and animal dealers. He UNDIPLOMATICALLY warned against the false teachings of SOME Pharisees.

He instructed his disciples to UNDIPLOMATICALLY confront evil by telling them if any place will not receive you ... and hear you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them." (Mark 6:11)  
He categorically refused TO BARGAIN with Satan in the account of his temptations.

Yes, and finally the cross - *his* UNDIPLOMATIC response to a possessed crowd. God made no deals with evil - Jesus asked for no special favors from the administration. He would suffer ridicule, lashing, mocking, and crucifixion before he would COMPROMISE WITH EVIL.

*obvious*  
So, what does this mean for us? For me it means that I must become more disciplined in my use of diplomacy. I hope it means the same for each of you. For me it means that I am called by God to be UNDIPLOMATIC when dealing with evil. I hope you hear the same call. For me it means that God loves me BUT NOT the evil I do... he asks that my confession ~~be~~ MORE than a diplomatic rationalization.

Yes, I believe that God loves you and me-- and that means HE GIVES EACH OF US THE POWER to UN-diplomatically condemn the evil that we perceive in ourselves, in each other, and in our society.

He desires that we live and die for a greater purpose than merely TO SATISFY OURSELVES or THE CROWD. He knows - and we know - that in the end we cannot afford to bargain with a crowd BENT ON DESTRUCTION.

I do not know what manifestation of evil besets you. It may be family fueds. Maybe grudges between you and friends or working associates. Maybe you're always feeling sorry for yourself. Maybe you're cheating someone or something - or someone is cheating you.

But I DO KNOW the evil that confronts me each day - both my own and that of others around me. And I DO KNOW of the evil that we as a city and nation have been exposed to daily. And above all, I DO KNOW of an evil cultural consciousness that has deeply penetrated the individuzal and corporate fabric of our society -- this evil phenomenon proclaims as its creed - ANYTHING'S O.K. AS LONG AS YOU DON'T GET CAUGHT. - My Christians friends, I believe this is the most serious manifestation of evil confronting us today.

Our God calls and challenges us to secure advantage over this evil and all other EVEN IF IT MAY AROUSE HOSTILITY OR CAUSE SUFFERING. That's not easy! But that's the challenge of faith as accepted children of God. . . . TO UN-DIPLOMATICALLY renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways in the confident hope that God always forgives us as we turn away from evil.

Amen

LENT V  
Luth. Church of the Master - Troy  
March 16, 1975

"WE SHALL OVERCOME"

"So from that day on they took counsel how to put him to death." John 11:53

Have any of you ever been near death?  
Have any of you experienced failure?  
Have any of you lost a beloved friend/relative?  
Have any of you ever suffered guilt feelings?  
Have any of you ever felt UNFAIRLY attacked?

All of us can identify with one of these experiences. And that means we ALL KNOW how Jesus must have been feeling in light of Caiaphas' analysis. For "expediency" sake, one man will suffer rather than the whole nation. A whole sermon could be given on this subject -- how often one person suffers for the guilt of a nation -- or related to family: sometimes one child suffers for the guilt of parents or other children.

But that's another issue. The issue of the moment is that Jesus was at the crossroad of defeat - of failure - of death!

God's plan was that Jesus was to be followed-- NOT CRUCIFIED! Instead, men decided to kill Jesus because he was a threat to their way of life. And so God's mission through Christ would soon suffer defeat - failure.

What does this mean? It means that DEFEAT - FAILURE - YES, DEATH -- all these are allowable under God's plan. In fact, they are not only allowable - they are inevitable!!

Contrary to the glamour stories of society, the Christian drama says THAT SUCCESS IS NOT THE ONLY WAY! In God's ballpark, there is room for failure.

Let's restate that: God does not desire - nor pre-determine defeat and failure -- BUT HE

DOES ALLOW FOR FAILURE. In fact, he allows for the death of each of us.

So - failure, defeat, and death IS NOT ALL bad news for the Christian. Through our encounter with Caiaphas TODAY, the Christian sees clearly that defeat and failure are ALLOWED by God.

But - that's only our first affirmation! The second is that the Christian ALSO recognizes that God REDEEMS defeat, failure & death!!!

God does not leave us to WALLOW IN OUR DEFEATS - God does not leave us possessed with guilt nor controlled by our passions and prejudices.

God redeems! That is, he takes our confession of failure - of defeat - of alienation or prejudice; And he says: You cannot stay there: my love makes you a new person.

How many of you have heard this message??  
How many of you feel you are NEW PERSONS?

My friends - that's grace -- God forgiving us for our failures and defeats IN ORDER TO MAKE US NEW FOLLOWERS - renewed - freed.

That leaves only one DEFEAT! Death itself. And that puts us TOTALLY IN THE REALM OF TRUST! God promises to hold our hand after we can no longer hold one another's in life. That's a promise! And that means that God HAS EVEN REDEEMED DEATH.

Death will not have the final victory! There may be a period of suffering - and grief over a loss - and, of course, separation. But God promises NO FINAL DEFEAT. We shall overcome!!

And just so that we might better believe, he allowed himself to experience THE FULLNESS of failure - of defeat - yes, death itself!! He wanted people to follow Jesus - instead, they chose to crucify Jesus!

So God expanded his purpose. Instead of *perfect*  
~~obedience~~ - he allowed for failure - defeat -  
and death -- AND THEN HE REDEEMED THESE BY  
OVERCOMING THEM THROUGH, FORGIVENESS AND  
RESURRECTION! *the power of*

He still promises that his forgiving *Power*  
CAN redeem any failure or defeat that we might  
experience.

And - beyond that - he still promises ALL WHO  
BELIEVE that nothing in all creation will  
separate us from his love. That's final  
victory for all of us!

Yes, we shall overcome!

AMEN

LENT V  
Luth Church of the Master, Troy  
3/27/77

"GUARDIANS OF GRACE"

"When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce; but the tenants thrashed him and sent him away empty-handed." Luke 20:10

What a contrast! Last week the parable of the prodigal son and loving father. This week the parable of the rejected servants. The one parable is so easy to hear: we are reminded of our loving Almighty Father. This week's parable more difficult to hear: we are reminded of our irresponsibility as his accepted children.

Yes - a more difficult parable to hear. We're told that the landlord (symbolizing God) gives the tenants a vineyard -- that is, a foundation of life to sustain themselves. The tenants are given freedom to develop this foundation. But the landlord remains in relationship to them. He sends his servant to remind and receive his rightful return from the vineyard.

The medium may be different today - but the message is the same. God gives us the vineyard-- life, relationships, and undergirding love. These are gifts of grace. But God does not just dump us at that point. He is not a watchmaker God -- he does not set life in motion and then let it run its own course.

God sends messengers who have the responsibility of making sure that humanity remains accountable to God. In one sense, we are all messengers. Yet for the sake of order, special servants have been appointed for this task. Obviously, I represent one of them.

At the same time, he calls each of us to be fellow guardians of God's grace. And it is the messengers task to remind the guardians of the responsibility they have OF LABORING AND SHARING THE FRUITS OF THE VINEYARD.

And so we see the focus of Luke's narrative here is upon you and me. The tenants or guardians are not some outside group hostile to Jesus. According to the Word here in Luke, it was the insiders who rejected the servants -- and finally rejected the son himself.

It was those who said "YES" to being guardians that also rejected the servants and their message from the landlord. Yes - you and I are the guardians of God's estate on earth. For we are the ones who have responded to his call.

Just think about that. It is you and I that make the difference. God has entrusted us with a tremendous responsibility. We are the guardians of all of God's gifts - THE GUARDIANS OF GRACE. Yes - guardians, but NOT OWNERS.

"GUARDIANS" - people who have a keen desire for overseeing -- people who do not take lightly any loss or harm that may occur to the fellow workers in the vineyard -- yes, guardians are people who SHOW Deep respect for their benevolent landlord, for his message, and for his messengers.

REFER TO INVENTORY OF GUARDIANSHIP.

So, what does this inventory tell us?? That not all of God's guardians at the Master have taken their landlord very seriously.

It's for that reason that FIRST OF ALL we must hear the parable of the prodigal son and loving Father. Yes, FIRST we must hear that God is forever forgiving to lost sons and daughters WHO RETURN TO HIM and respond anew.

But we must also hear today's parable. We must hear that God does not TAKE LIGHTLY those guardians who continue to reject his message and and his fellow guardians and messengers. God continues to offer his grace -- but if we reject his offer -- then we have made our choice. And God is not going to force us back to him.

God's grace has freed us from yesterday's failures if we have confessed them and repented. Like Paul says -- yesterday's mistakes are like garbage.

So with that grace in mind -- what about our guardianship today and tomorrow? Will God's message again be rejected -- even to the point of crucifixion. Or will we LIVE ANEW as guardians who worship, witness, learn, serve and support THE GRACE OF GOD.

AMEN



LENT IV

Luth Church of the Master, Troy  
March 12, 1978

"IS IT THE SAME OLD THING?"

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes Lord!" Martha answered. "I do believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." John 11:25-27

Last December, we were right in the middle of the Advent season when one of my 3rd year catechism students said: "This whole Christmas thing is really boring. It's the same old thing - year after year. We've heard this story a hundred times; it's really dumb to keep on repeating it year after year."

It took me a few seconds to catch my already evaporating cool. I thought to myself - "Thank God that we have a merciful Lord." And then I went on trying to explain why we Christians find significance in repeating the story and events of the Nativity.

Well - here we are in the middle of Lent. I've got a hunch that some of my catechism students are again saying: "It's the same old story every Lent and Easter. It's the same old thing - so why even bother?"

Although I don't exactly enjoy hearing that kind of blasphemy from catechism students -- at least I try to be tolerant when I hear it. After all - a 14 or 15 year old cannot be expected to completely grasp the significance of the resurrection.

But I truly question whether these feelings only get expression from catechism students. Quite frankly, I'd be willing to wager that many adult Christians have very similar views

about the significance of Jesus' birth -- as well as the significance of his death and resurrection. For far too many believers, the life-death-resurrection of Jesus Christ is JUST THE SAME OLD THING year after year. As far as they're concerned -- it's like seeing a fairly good rerun on TV every year.

That might sound like a harsh judgment on my part -- but I think the evidence bears it out year after year. Recently I asked our financial secretary to give me a breakdown of the congregation's Lenten giving. I was appalled by the results -- absolutely shocked to learn that more than 50 families have NOT YET used one Lenten offering envelop yet.

You may ask - so what does that prove?? Well to me it proves that Jesus' sacrifice really hasn't made much of an impression upon modern day believers. It seems to indicate that the Lenten story is a good story -- but it really hasn't empowered us TO BE LIKE CHRIST. It appears to be JUST THE SAME OLD THING for a majority of Christian believers today.

Obviously - Lenten giving cannot be singled out as the only criterion to use for judgment. But even with its limitations - it still represents ONE tangible thread of evidence which shows the degree to which Jesus Christ's life and death has penetrated our lives.

That was the same issue at stake between Martha and Jesus. Before he showed the power of God with him by raising Lazarus -- he confronted Martha to get from her a confession of her faith. And her confession was: I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God.

Now - it was much more difficult for Martha to say that than for you and me. She had much less evidence to go on at that time. Jesus had not yet been crucified -- so Martha had no evidence of the resurrection. And yet she believed in the power of this man.

You and I have a distinct advantage over Martha. We live on the resurrection side of the cross. We have not only seen Jesus Christ pay the full penalty for our sin -- but we have also seen him freed from the worst enemy -- death. We are witnesses to the resurrection -- and not only witnesses, but we are the benefactors of that same reality.

So how in the world CAN ANY BELIEVING Christian view the Lenten drama AS JUST THE SAME OLD THING?? How can our inheritance in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ be taken for granted?? How can we be so thankless in our Lenten pilgrimage?? How can we blaspheme Christ by being apathetic toward his mission on earth?? Either he is THE CHRIST TO US -- or he's nothing more than another good man.

But Jesus Christ cannot be in-between someplace and still be the Christ. He's either our Savior - or he's nobody!

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Well obviously as far as I'm concerned -- and I trust as far as your concerned -- he's most definitely THE CHRIST. Well then there is only one way to live -- we must live fueled by his power. We must think of Jesus Christ as a power -- not as a character in a drama.

And as that power rather than a man IN THAT SAME OLD STORY - he empowers us in at least 3 ways:

- 1) HE DELIVERS US FROM THE PAST AND ITS GUILT
- 2) HE FREES US FROM THE BONDAGE OF OUR PRESENT WEAKNESS - our egos.
- 3) HE FREES US FROM THE FEAR OF THE FUTURE

When we begin to experience Christ in these

dimensions -- then we are confessing with Martha: I do believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God.

Then the Lenten Story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection IS NOT JUST THE SAME OLD THING. Then it is a story that we hunger to hear over and over again -- because just in hearing it we are renewed with his forgiving mercy.

And that's a power that I have to be renewed in every day -- because without Christ's power, I become spiritually dead -- I become greedy, I become exploitive -- I become an ego freak -- I become annihilated with myself...and that's death everlasting.

What is this Lenten pilgrimage for you? Is it just the same old boring thing -- or have you again accepted Jesus as the Christ?

You better fasten your seatbelt if he's the Christ in your life -- because he's going to take a real piece of your life before he's through with you -- or should I say before he gives you the resurrection.

AMEN

5th Sunday in Lent  
Luth Church of the Master, Troy  
April 1, 1979

"NOT ~~MINE~~, BUT ~~THINE~~ BE DONE!"

Hebrews 5:7-9

I remember entering one of my first systematic theology classes in seminary. The great old scholar who taught the course went through the procedure of calling the role. As he did so, each of us rose and was recognized as his name was called. Then he closed his classbook ... looked over his spectacles ... and zeroed in on us with those studious eyes, finally saying: GENTLEMEN, WE HAVE SPENT APPROXIMATELY FIVE MINUTES DECIDING WHO YOU ARE!

"We will not spend the rest of the semester deciding WHY YOU ARE." Because you see, gentlemen, this is the purpose of all religion - all philosophy - all metaphysics: TO DETERMINE WHY YOU ARE !

That is the issue of life as we sit here this morning ... or any other time. Why are you here? Why are you in this church building this morning? Why are you in this world? What are you alive for? What's your purpose for being? Why are you here?

The Christian faith has and always will give one simple answer to that question: TO KNOW... AND TO DO THE WILL OF YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN. Or as today's sermon title suggests, "Not mine, but thine be done."

You and I spend a whole Christian lifetime seeking to KNOW and to FULFILL that will of our Father in heaven. And through the author of Hebrews - we are directed to the most powerful expression of the Father's will for us: the EARTHLY LIFE OF JESUS. We best know the will of God as we look at the humanity of Jesus...

and his obedience to the Father.

You see - there are a lot of Christians who kind of romanticize Jesus' life. They make him out to be SO DIVINE, that they strip him of any humanity. They really turn Jesus into a holy freak -- into a person who didn't really experience the fulness of humanity.

But thank God for the writer of Hebrews. Because in three short verses, he sums up Jesus' human response TO THE WILL OF GOD: He says:

In the days of Jesus' flesh,  
he offered prayers & supplications  
with loud cries and tears...

he further says that Jesus learned  
obedience through suffering

and finally says that Jesus was made  
perfect ... that Jesus was made completely  
adequate to save us because he fully  
surrendered to the Father's will.

There you see in three short verses - the characterization of the Christian life in the flesh. Let me summarize it even more simply that I already have:

Jesus struggled.  
Jesus suffered. and  
Finally Jesus surrendered!

These are the traits of the truly  
human Christian life. To do the will of the  
Father in heaven MEANS that WE WILL STRUGGLE,  
WE WILL SUFFER, and WE WILL FINALLY SURRENDER  
to what God has prepared for all of us through  
Jesus Christ. Let's look at these more closely.

We're told that Jesus prayed, and that his  
prayers included loud cries and tears. Nothing  
could more clearly say THAT JESUS DID NOT HAVE  
IT MADE. God was not giving Jesus a romantic  
trip to heaven. Quite to the contrary -- Jesus  
found himself in serious conflict and turmoil  
over God's will for him. Said more simply -  
there were times THAT JESUS WANTED OUT.

Let's face it - to love, to forgive, to drink the cup of servanthood and sacrifice IS NO EASY WAY TO LIVE. It causes conflict ... turmoil ... and sometimes even the desire to quit. Rather than face the hostility of friends -- rather than seeking to witness to the love of God -- most of the times it's easier to give into the pressures and just float along with the status quo.

But like Jesus, the Christian who has a real relationship with God NEVER GETS OFF THE HOOK. There's always the struggle. Obviously, sometimes we give into the crowd... sometimes we sell God short. So we turn to him for his mercy. But the struggle never stops.

And like Jesus - the struggle always leads to suffering ON ACCOUNT OF OUR FAITH. Jesus could have backed off -- he could have compromised with the people who were upset and angry with him. But he didn't. He had his Father's mission to complete. And whether that took him to Galilee, Jerusalem, or Golgatha -- he had to proclaim the Father's will, not merely try to save his own skin.

Each of us in different ways faces this test everyday. Which one of us hasn't angered family or friends when we have put God before them. Sometimes we even get rejected when we seek to do God's will. Many times I have reached out to forgive or to be forgiven -- only to be slapped down ... to be told to "cram" that religious stuff.

Yes - to do the Father's will WILL SURELY YIELD A FAIR SHARE OF SUFFERING ... and sometimes it even means the death of human relationships.

Which of course leads to the last human, yet divine, trait we see in Jesus. Ultimately, he knew the only way to salvation was to SURRENDER himself to God, because he knew he wouldn't be saved by his own ego -- no matter how great he was!

Yes - this is the last step of faith ... and yet it's a step we have to take continually in our lives -- the step of surrender. There comes a time when every honest human being ~~finally~~ realizes THAT HE MUST CAST HIMSELF UTTERLY AND FINALLY ON THE MERCY OF GOD.

For some people - this does not come until they are confronted by death itself. Only then do they realize that their only hope is the mercy of the Father in heaven.

For young people - the step of surrender is very difficult -- because they are at the height of their physical and psychological power in life. We often wonder why the church is not filled with people between 20 - 30 years old. The facts are that during this time in life WE IDOLIZE OURSELVES -- we figure we don't need God because we've got control of our own destiny. How sad it is that so many young people delude themselves into this hypocrisy.

But thank God - he doesn't give up on us EVEN AFTER we've given up on him. He waits for us to grow up ... to realize that he is the ultimate source of life now and forever. He patiently continues to offer his mercy through the cup of forgiveness ... WAITING FOR AN ARROGANT WORLD to get down on her knees and receive his free gift of love.

So - again today, we praise God for bringing you back to Him ... to thank him and receive his love. Yes, thank God that you have gone beyond merely asking WHO YOU ARE... you have come to show WHAT YOU ARE HERE FOR. amen



LENT V  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 23, 1980

"GOOD INVESTMENTS YIELD GOOD RETURNS"

When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, that they should give him some of the fruit of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him, and sent him away empty handed." Luke 20:10

Almost two months ago, the Church Council invested a portion of property improve funds in a secure ~~yet~~ relatively high-yielding investment fund. The financial assistant and church council ~~has~~ been watching that investment very closely. ~~Even though~~ they are very secure funds -- the council wants to be absolutely certain that a good return is given for a good investment.

Few of us in this room would argue against this philosophical view of life. Most of us who own homes feel keenly sensitive about this issue. We ~~perceive~~ our homes as good investments, and quite logically - we want appreciated returns from this investment.

Likewise in our business or even congregational life. We look for ~~executives~~; ~~for~~ laborers, for pastors who will give us good returns on our investments. The least we expect from those we hire is a fair day's labor for a fair day's wage.

Some of you young people wonder why your parents get up tight when your achievement in school is poor. One reason is that your parents know how much is being invested in you each year-- they know that the state is investing over \$ \_\_\_\_\_ a year in your education. That doesn't begin to match the hopes and dreams and dollars and devotion that your parents invest in your future. They don't expect you to be perfect -- but they do expect SOME RETURN - SOME APPRECIATION - SOME RECOGNITION for their good investment.

*Let's look at ~~the~~ government for 1971 - why is there so much dismal*

talk about politics and politicians today? Is it because we do not believe in investing tax dollars in our government and country's needs? I don't think so! I think most Americans still believe in the tax system as a good investment. But I also think many Americans are disallusioned with the mismanagement - the fraud - the bribery - the waste of that investment. In short, many of us feel that tax investments are not yielding the returns of justice and righteousness in the land.

I could go on with many examples along this same theme. - Even within the hallowed walls of this sanctuary we have seen good investments which have exemplified good returns ... and some other things which have yielded poor returns. The point is that quite simply as human beings we expect good returns from our good investments.

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This whole arena of investments and returns leads us right into the Parable of the wicked tenants. Obviously - the vineyard in this allegory represents all the gifts of life -- and the owner of the vineyard is God. And God leases out this vineyard to some farmer tenants -- namely, you and me, the people of the world.

And then he leaves these tenants to themselves-- he allows them the freedom to be productive and to enjoy the fruits of their labors. God graces these tenants with the abundance of the earth. But dare they claim ownership of the vineyard -- he has his messenger return to receive a fair rental return for His investment. But what is there response to this messenger: REJECTION, REBUKE, ANGER, VIOLENCE, and even MURDER. That's the thanks the owner of the vineyard gets for his investment in these tenants.

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You and I are those tenants. And one of our great temptations is to play with one set of rules

for our own investments -- and a totally different set of rules for God's investments in us.

I've already commented on the rules for our own investments: we not only expect, we often demand a good return in this area. But what about God's investment in us? Let's just look at one of his simple investments -- our bodies!

And let's just take our mouths for an example. While at Cincinnati last weekend - one of the speakers reminded us how our mouths are one of our greatest assets - but also our greatest liabilities. Our mouths can bless -- and our mouths can curse. I ask each of you -- what kind of a return does God get from your mouth?!?

How much time does your mouth spend in comforting others? In telling them that you love them? In just plain keeping shut so that you can hear what others say?

Or is your mouth a cursing mouth? Does it constantly flap with gossip -- do you find yourself demeaning God and other people? Do you use your mouth to undercut -- to talk behind the back of other people? Is your mouth full of the pollution of slander and hatred? [Or is it a totally apathetic mouth -- it never moves for anything??]

God has invested a lot of his love in your mouth -- and he expects a loving return. What is he getting?

Or how about your feet?? A lot of people get their mouths going very well -- but they never get their feet going with their mouths. They say all the right religious words -- but they never get their feet going in order to share what their mouths have to say.

God blessed us with feet so that we can get his message out to the whole world. But there's a lot of Christians who haven't done much with their feet -- they just stand in one place on Sunday morning and say a lot of religious words --

But those religious thoughts terminate right in the  
pew -- they don't translate those words into their  
feet -- they don't take those words of love  
into their households - into their businesses -  
into the vineyards of life where people rub  
shoulders & work & sweat with one another.

God has blessed us with bodies that come with  
mouths and feet. He has esp. invested a lot of  
his love in our feet -- but he's getting a pretty  
poor return from the feet of many of his believers.  
Because their faith is standing still. God ~~really~~  
really wants followers who will use their feet.  
As Scripture says: "How beautiful are the feet of  
those who preach the good news!" (Rom. 10:15)

Paul here is not talking about a beauty contest  
for feet -- he is talking about those Christians  
who share God's love on the highways and byways  
of life. They are returning God's love by  
using their feet.

They are serving as messengers of God's  
Word -- just like the one's who came to the  
tenants in the parable. They came and asked  
the tenants to return a portion of God's  
investment. But the tenants rejected the  
messengers. They used their mouths and their  
feet and their hands and their weapons -- and  
they shamefully treated God's messengers.

Friends in Christ -- that's often the way  
we respond to God's message and his messengers:  
instead of showing gratitude for his investment  
in us -- for his overflowing gifts of creation  
and ever-patient forgiveness -- we respond  
with anger. We often reject *HIS EXAMPLE OF LOVE and*  
the messengers who bring it.

You say it isn't so. Well unfortunately it  
often is. I've often seen a husband or wife  
who has desparately sought to rekindle the love  
of a <sup>dying</sup> marriage -- only to be ruthlessly rejected!!

I've often seen family members who have had  
a slight misunderstanding -- and when one attempts

to reconcile and bring harmony back into that family -- another members retorts with scorn and scandle.

*EVEN* In business we see *GOD'S MESSENGERS REJECTED*. We have all known associates who have sought to be honest--above board--moral & considerate. Yet they often get axed or demoted, because they do not play dirty enough!

And yes - very often right in God's holy tabernacles we have some of the worst examples of violent tenants. Right in this place where God seeks to love and forgive us -- we often hear self-righteous people seeking to judge and condemn *and demean* one another -- TOTALLY MISSING THE MEANING OF THE GREATEST INVESTMENT OF GRACE THAT GOD HAS EVER OFFERED -- the forgiving sacrifice of his Son.

*Yes* God's messengers have often paid the price of a sacrificial return for sharing God's investment of love ... *for God's investments:*

- Elijah was driven into the wilderness...
- Isaiah's body was sawn in two ...
- Jeremiah was stoned to death ...
- John the Baptist was beheaded ...
- Jesus was crucified ...

And God's messengers since Jesus have continued to be banished and bullied and bloodied ...

*BUT THAT HAS NOT STOPPED GOD'S MESSAGE OF LOVE.*

~~But~~ Even after Christ himself was killed ... God continues to send back messengers to his tenants -- patiently hoping that they will offer a good return for his investment in them.

But there is one thing that God will not tolerate -- and that's the continued rejection of his Son's forgiving sacrifice. To those persons who continue to reject that powerful investment from God -- he says: those tenants will finally be destroyed -- they will not know the eternal investment of life with God.

Thanks be to God that you and I are here today to again receive *a new* investment of love ... God help us to yield a good return! AMEN

5th Sunday of Lent  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 28, 1982

"WHEN THE TIME COMES ..."

Jesus said: "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. ... Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour?" No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name."

John 12:23,27

Hebrews 5:7-9

One of my New Testament professors who was a classic scholar began every new class by calling roll. Each seminarian rose and was recognized as his name was called. Then the professor would close his roll book -- lower his spectacles -- and zoom in upon us with his wrinkled, studious eyes, finally saying:

"Gentlemen, we have spent approximately five minutes of this semester deciding WHO YOU ARE. We will now spend the rest of the semester deciding WHO YOU ARE. Because you see, gentlemen, this is the purpose of all religion, all philosophy, all metaphysics: to determine WHY YOU ARE!"

The same is true for our presence in worship: we are here to discover the purpose for WHY WE ARE, not to merely catalog WHO WE ARE. And yet as true as this is -- the majority of our lives are spent cataloging WHO'S WHO.

For the average Christian, life has a way of plodding or rushing along without any real deep questions or ultimate concerns. Most of that time we focus upon building up WHO WE ARE. For instance - we raise our children with the aim of being "somebodies." We make our investments, add up our securities, build up our bank accounts so that we can assure ourselves WHO WE ARE. We buy and build better homes to make sure everyone knows WHO WE ARE. In short, we spend most of time and energy establishing WHO WE ARE. During all those years, a high percentage of Christians never ask the question: Why are we? Why am I here!?

But when the time of tragedy, or divorce, or serious illness or heart attack, or career cancellation or change of life, or maybe just a good old knock-down, drag-out fight -- WHEN THAT TIME COMES, then we're finally ready to face the real purpose of religion: WHY ARE WE HERE?

For Jesus, that TIME came all the time, but in particular that time came in a dramatic way when he was about 33 (not even at mid-life crisis). We're told that Phillip & Andrew asked Jesus to meet with a couple of Greeks, and for some unknown reason, Jesus responds to that as the ultimate moment. He says: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." The Greeks wanted to know "Who" Jesus was; instead, he answered the querie by telling "WHY HE WAS."

And what was *His* answer to the question "Why are we here?" In paraphrased form, Jesus said: TO KNOW, TO LOVE, AND TO FULFILL THE WILL OF OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN." Or said more simply, "to glorify God's name!"

That sounds so simple, doesn't it? The whole purpose of our Christian faith and religion is TO GLORIFY GOD'S NAME. But Jesus also shows that TO DO THAT is never a simple task. Jesus shows that WHEN THE TIME COMES to glorify God -- it is always a moment of struggle, of suffering, and finally of surrender.

The text from Hebrews today beautifully summarizes the life of Jesus and any of us when we seek to glorify God: The writer says: Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears\*... that Jesus had to learn obedience to God through suffering ... and that he was finally made perfect by surrendering to the source of his salvation, namely, God.

\* he  
struggled

To do God's will Jesus did more than merely talk or sing about it: he struggled to accept it; he suffered in accepting it; and he finally surrendered in fulfilling it. Through struggle, through suffering, and through surrender, Jesus glorified the Father in heaven.

And that's the bottom line message of today's texts: there is no easy way for the Christian or anyone else in life. If we really want the ultimate meaning of WHY WE ARE HERE, then there will be *many* TIMES of struggling, suffering, and surrendering.

In looking at the gospel text, we see that Jesus struggled with the question: "Father save me from this hour." Likewise the Hebrews text, we read that Jesus struggled; that he prayed and supplicated with loud cries and tears. It's crystal clear: Jesus found himself in serious conflict and turmoil over God's will for him. Or said more graphically -- Jesus was contemplating whether he should bail out.

Isn't that the same struggle that you and I experience when trying to glorify God's name?? We know that to be faithful to God means to love, to forgive, to be non-violent, to drink the cup of servanthood and sacrifice. But WHEN THE TIME COMES ... when God gives us the opportunity to glorify Him rather than merely cluthing to ourselves, to our things, or to our lives -- the conflict and turmoil is very real.

Which one of us haven't had squabbles this past week which reflect this struggle with God's will??? We know in our hearts that God is glorified when we are loving and forgiving -- but that's such a struggle. We would so often rather be ruled by our own stubbornness and self-righteousness. In essence, there are many times we'd rather bail out than seek to glorify the Father.

But like Jesus, <sup>for his</sup> faithful people the struggle goes on. And as that struggle to love God and neighbor goes on -- it often reflects crying and tears, heartache and hurt, and many times suffering and sacrifice. To glorify God always means dying a little to self in order that we might rise that much more for others.

Jesus used the image of wheat to illustrate the goodness of sacrifice: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Jesus sowed his own life as seed on a field called Calvary. The fruit of that sowing is the church of the redeemed. From Calvary's ground has sprung forth the life of Christ forevermore. The sacrifice of one life has literally transformed millions.

To glorify God's name is not merely to sit on the membership rolls of Hope Lutheran Church. There is no glory for God in that, for membership merely gives "Who" we are ... it doesn't show "why we are here." God calls us to be more than members of his church; he calls us to be disciples in the world. And "when the time comes" to be a disciple -- there is always



a cost involved -- we die to ourselves in order that we might glorify the name and power of God.

That step of sacrifice always reflects the third dimension of faith -- the step of surrender. There comes a time in ALL Christians' lives when they realize that they must CAST THEMSELVES UTTERLY AND FINALLY UPON THE MERCY OF GOD.

For some people - this does not come until they are seriously confronted by death itself. Only then do they realize that their only hope is the mercy of the Father in heaven. Only then do they realize that the ultimate significance of their lives is in the hands of God.

Surrender is the most difficult step, especially when everything in life is going so well. I've too often heard people say, "Why should I believe in God's love and promises; I'm doing pretty well without his help." *How* sad when people don't realize that everything we have is a gift of God's grace.

I'm often asked by members, why is it that our young people so often drop out of the church after high school?? It really doesn't take a genius to answer that question -- that's the greatest time of life in which we think we have total control of our own destiny. It is the time of greatest vitality ... of greatest exuberance ... and of at least great intellectual potential. So it is that young people at that time think they've got life by the tail -- why should they consider surrendering to the will of God's love and mercy??

Sometimes people live with that adolescent notion not only in their late teens and twenties; I've seen many a 50 or 60 year-old-man with the same philosophy: "I'll worry about God when the time comes ... "

Well, the time has come! The hour has come for God to be glorified. And through Jesus Christ, we have seen not only God's name glorified -- we have seen life glorified, because we have received the merciful forgiveness of God.

Through Jesus Christ - we have been assured by God that He hasn't given up on us ... even though we often give up on Him.

Through Jesus Christ, we know that God patiently waits for us to grow out of our adolescence .... hoping that we won't wait too long to surrender to his way, truth, and life for us.

Through Jesus Christ, we have come to know and to love God as our ultimate source of life ... and we have come to know *at ALL times* not only WHO WE ARE ... BUT WHY WE ARE HERE :

TO STRUGGLE AND SOMETIMES SUFFER IN ORDER THAT WE MIGHT  
ALWAYS SURRENDER TO THE LOVE OF GOD AND NEIGHBOR!!

LENT VI  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 20, 1983  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"GOD NEVER GIVES UP!"

..."Forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead; press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Phil: 3:14

"What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants, and give the vineyard to others." Luke 20:16

Prof. Richard Heefler of Southern Seminary reflects on today's parable by saying: "The assassination of authority is one of the most significant events of our age. The time was when kings and princes ruled nations -- a father was the unchallenged head of the family -- and God was in the heavens and all was right with the world. But that day is past.

I'm not so certain that I would totally agree with Prof. Heefler that there was ever a PERFECT GOLDEN AGE - where the authority of kings & princes, popes and parents truly reflected justice and harmony for our world. But I would agree that our age -- especially since Watergate -- has been hell-bent on assassinating authority. We seem to get our jollies today by attacking presidents, legislators, and representatives of all kings, whether in government, the church, or our social organizations or civic leaders.

In short, we seem to be on a binge of abusing our freedom rather than using it responsibly. For instance, when times are tough -- when the organization, or country, or church or whatever is not going well -- then we complain that "NO ONE SEEMS TO BE IN CHARGE." In short, when times are tough, we blame everyone else and almost demand dictatorial authority.

But when things are good (which in this country is most of the time) -- then we don't want assertive authority. Because assertive authority makes us mindful that we are accountable and responsible for more than number 1 -- ourselves. And by nature -- in fact, by our sinful nature, we don't want to be accountable-- we don't want to be responsible or interdependent-- as Frank Sinatra's popular ballad said it: "I Want It My Way!" In good times - we don't want any interference from authority!

Let me briefly illustrate from the perspective of the church. When things are going bad -- then it's always the pastor's fault, or the council's fault, or some committee's problem. But when things are o.k. or going well -- when the church's leadership is doing a competent and dedicated job -- then we have people coming out of the woodwork saying: "Don't do it that way -- do it my way!" In short, leadership today is caught in a Catch 22 -- they are rejected for both their failures and their accomplishments.

Such was the case in today's parable -- in this case, rebellion and rejection of authority because it was doing a good job. The story is of a man who owns a vineyard -- obviously, the man is God -- the vineyard represents you and me and all the life and relationships that support us. The man had a carefully planned program for the vineyard's production. He planted it. He built a wall around it to protect it from poachers. He built a watchtower to oversee its protection. He did everything that a responsible authority should do. But despite all his efforts -- he ran into rebellion! Not from the outside, but from within!

The people he had hired to be his servants (his disciples) reject and rebel against his authority. They attempt to claim the vineyard for themselves. They kill the messengers he sends to insure his rightful authority and ownership. Finally - he resorts to sending his son -- thinking that would surely respect his own son. But they kill him as well.

The Christology of this story is blatantly obvious -- not even the authority of Jesus Christ is respected among his Father's own servants. To get it their way -- they will even stoop low enough to murder the Son of God in order that they can take control.

It would appear that this story has nothing but a tragic ending and application. Obviously - for those who rebel and reject God -- the ending is tragic. God will not tolerate rejection; he will forgive and all other sins, but he will not overlook rejection. There is no eternal life for those who reject the Giver, the Author and the Ruler of the Universe.

But God never gives up just because of a few rebellious rejecters! And neither does the story end with rebellion or rejection. The Last Word of the story is God's faithful word -- namely, "I will give the vineyard to others!"

Here we see the Good News of this story! The owner of this world's vineyard has a plan that will not be frustrated or turned aside by temporary setbacks -- by rebellious insiders! Obviously - those rebellious insiders in Jesus' day were the chief priests and the scribes. They were rejecting God by rejecting his authority in Jesus Christ. And God will not have it that way! He will not give up in the face of rebellion or rejection! He will assert his authority through new and faithful leaders! Because he is in charge at the beginning and the end of his story on earth-- he has the Last Word on all matters within his vineyard.

As his tenants -- as his people -- it is important that we see the application of this story. First - there is a Word of caution in it for all of us. When we make our pronouncements within the life of the church -- whose will and whose spirit are we reflecting?!? There are some matters of God's will and spirit that are not the property of public opinion surveys. As God's people, we must always be cautious that "in getting things our way" we may very well be rejecting and rebelling against God's way! God has the Last Word on whose in charge in this vineyard -- and we dare not reject the cornerstone of his weight -- the word and will of Jesus Christ.

But our second application is possibly even more significant than the first. As God's laborers in the vineyard - there is a tendency for us to give up as soon as we encounter rebellion or rejection in the vineyard. So often we hear our fellow members say negative or rejecting things -- and we're tempted to be swayed by them. We're tempted to allow their murderous, negative, or slanderous thoughts become the ruling spirit within the vineyard.

It's at that moment that we must recall that God will not allow that negative, murderous spirit to have authority in his vineyard. It may have its way for a short time -- but it will be replaced. God's goal for the upward call of his vineyard will not be defeated by a few destructive laborers.

God will turn rejection into redemption. That's what the journey of Lent is all about! God will take the cross and turn it into an empty tomb! Obviously - there will be struggle and sacrifice and even death along the way -- but God never gives up! He will not allow the murderous, evil, divisive forces of life to have the Last Word .. the final victory!

We have seen that determined Spirit time after time in our secular lives. Geo Washington lost six of the nine major Revolutionary War battles -- but he kept coming back to win. Ben Hogan lay wounded after being hit by a bus -- but he got on his braces and kept swinging his clubs coming back as both a U.S. and British champion. A Belfast, Ireland baker has been bombed out shop 25 times. After the 25th time, he baked a large cake with 25 candles -- and invited the neighborhood to celebrate and eat his cake to announce THAT HE WOULD BUILD IT AGAIN! This is the Spirit of God.

Into each generation he has sent messengers with his words of love and mercy burning on their lips. He has seen those generations reject his word -- rape his environment -- overpopulate parts of his world -- bankrupt themselves through pleasure and excessive spending -- and yet that same God says to those same people: I'M NOT GOING TO GIVE UP ON YOU.

This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. God gives, God forgives, and God gives again! We reject God, but he redeems us! Because God will not give up -- he has too much investment in the goodness of his creation! His hope is that we will respect and respond to his authority rather than ASSASSINATING HIM AND ONE ANOTHER THROUGH OUR REBELLION AND REJECTION!

AMEN

LENT V

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

April 8, 1984

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"DISCIPLESHIP IS MORE THAN A TAX WRITE-OFF!"

"The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's (adopted) children. Now if we are (adopted) children, then we are heirs -- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." Romans 8:16-17

During a "Word and Witness" seminar at Princeton Seminary, a professor posed a simple question to this group of budding clergy and laity: "Who is a true Christian ... who is a true disciple of Christ?"

The answers given by clergy and laity alike reflected the spectrum of current fads in religious thinking. Each person seemed to be riding his/her own theological hobbyhorse. One person quoted Bonhoeffer saying the true Christian is the "one who is a man for others ... the one who pays the cost of discipleship." Another, reflecting Tillich, said, "The true disciple is the one with ultimate concern." Some pointed to Baptism as the mark of the true Christian: "he who believes and is baptized is saved." Still others said true Christians are those who are church members. Some stressed social awareness as true discipleship: "A true Christian is one who challenges the sick social order." And of course, the pentecostalists in the group asserted that "the true disciple was he/she who was "born again," who had the "gifts of healing" or "gifts of tongues."

As is typical in religious groups (esp Lutheran religious groups)-- there was not great unanimity! Finally, one person spoke up: "All of you are giving "activist" answers - focusing upon what a Christian does, not what he/she IS. I want to know if your true Christian man or woman is still a true disciple when he/she is asleep???"

As Prof. Richard Hoefler said, Now here was a student who was getting to the heart of the matter! For what establishes YOU AND ME as true Christians is not "what we do," but rather "whose we are" (whom we belong to!?).

That is always the first question of authentic discipleship: "whose are you?" In Romans 8:11-19, Paul gives us a straight-forward answer. He says, the true Christian is the one who has been adopted into the family of God. And once adopted by God, we are true Christians (true disciples) whether asleep or awake. Our human activity does not change God's adoption of us: ONCE ADOPTED, ALWAYS ADOPTED. Or said differently, once given the name of Christ in Baptism -- that name can never be taken from us.

That is a first and most significant point of today's text: ADOPTION BY GOD IS SERIOUS BUSINESS. For Paul, the concept of "adoption" was patterned after the Roman culture-- where adoption was a very serious matter.

First, adoption meant you lost all legal rights in your old family and gained ALL RIGHTS of your new family. It meant death with the old... and new life with the new. For Paul to say that we have been adopted by God means that we have the same rights as the Son of God...as Christ himself. That's a pretty profound adoption!

But adoption meant more. The adopted child in Roman culture became an heir to his new father's estate. Even if blood-sons were born after the adoption, it did not affect the adopted child's rights. These rights were guarded by an elaborate ceremony requiring the signature of seven witnesses -- who would testify should the adopted child's rights ever be questioned. Adoption meant full inheritance!

But there was even more in this adopted inheritance! Once adopted, all previous debts were cancelled. The adopted one was given complete freedom from all previous moral or legal debts. Adoption meant a totally new life--totally free from the burdens of the past! To be an adopted child of God was to be totally free from yesterday's debts, guilts, burdens, and sins!

Finally, an adopted child was considered "blood" of the new family -- regardless of his previous status, color, ethnic roots, or whatever! Adoption meant total, absolute, final equality in the family! In Roman culture -- there was no such thing as a lesser child because of adoption!

The implications of this text should be obvious to all of



us. "Who is the true Christian ... who is the true disciple of Christ?" THE ANSWER: ALL WHO HAVE BEEN ADOPTED BY GOD! And that my friends includes all of us who have been adopted by God in Baptism! We are all true Christians! We are all true disciples! Not by our own actions -- but by God's action in Jesus Christ on the cross! Once and for all -- God has made us his ... he has cancelled our past debts ... he has become our forgiving father ... and now he desires to lead us into the fulness of our discipleship!!

And that's of course the second question or point of today's text: once we are aware of our inheritance ... once we are aware of being God's adopted children ... once we know "whose we are -- then the question is: WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO WITH THIS INHERITANCE???"

It's the same question that anyone faces when they have received an inheritance. Very rarely do people say: I DON'T WANT IT! GIVE IT TO SOMEONE ELSE! But rather, NOW THAT I HAVE IT, WHAT AM I GOING TO DO WITH IT!?

God has made us co-heirs with Christ -- he has given us equal status with him who died on the cross! He has not given us a partial inheritance -- he has given us the works! Through the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ -- we have received the total inheritance!

The question is: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?? Are we alive to that inheritance -- or are we still living as slaves to a fearful past. Do we live alive to tomorrow's opportunities -- are we living in despair because of yesterday's faults and mistakes!?? Have the burdens of our day made us into a field of dry, decaying bones; or are we allowing God's spirit to come into the death of our lives to bring new vitality into our relationship with Him and one another??

Soren Kiekegaard, the 20th century existentialist, claims that he rarely saw much new life and vitality from those adopted sons of God called Christians. He classified Christians and the Christian church as a barnyard of well-fed geese.

In this parable, Kiekegaard compares the church to a flock of geese in a very handsome and secure barnyard. From time to time, one of the geese would take the risk to climb the barnyard fence and tell the other geese about the joys of

That is always the first question of authentic discipleship: "whose are you?" In Romans 8:11-19, Paul gives us a straight-forward answer. He says, the true Christian is the one who has been adopted into the family of God. And once adopted by God, we are true Christians (true disciples) whether asleep or awake. Our human activity does not change God's adoption of us: ONCE ADOPTED, ALWAYS ADOPTED. Or said differently, once given the name of Christ in Baptism -- that name can never be taken from us.

That is a first and most significant point of today's text: ADOPTION BY GOD IS SERIOUS BUSINESS. For Paul, the concept of "adoption" was patterned after the Roman culture-- where adoption was a very serious matter.

First, adoption meant you lost all legal rights in your old family and gained ALL RIGHTS of your new family. It meant death with the old... and new life with the new. For Paul to say that we have been adopted by God means that we have the same rights as the Son of God...as Christ himself. That's a pretty profound adoption!

But adoption meant more. The adopted child in Roman culture became an heir to his new father's estate. Even if blood-sons were born after the adoption, it did not affect the adopted child's rights. These rights were guarded by an elaborate ceremony requiring the signature of seven witnesses -- who would testify should the adopted child's rights ever be questioned. Adoption meant full inheritance!

But there was even more in this adopted inheritance! Once adopted, all previous debts were cancelled. The adopted one was given complete freedom from all previous moral or legal debts. Adoption meant a totally new life--totally free from the burdens of the past! To be an adopted child of God was to be totally free from yesterday's debts, guilts, burdens, and sins!

Finally, an adopted child was considered "blood" of the new family -- regardless of his previous status, color, ethnic roots, or whatever! Adoption meant total, absolute, final equality in the family! In Roman culture -- there was no such thing as a lesser child because of adoption!

The implications of this text should be obvious to all of

flight -- and how God had created them for something more than a barnyard existence. Prophetically, this goose would remind them of the adventures of their courageous ancestors who had flown across the trackless wastes. As the goose spoke, there would be an occasional nod of a few heads in agreement. Once in a while there would even be a flap of a wing or two. But the geese never flew. The barnyard was safe; and the corn was too good. The geese chose not to fulfill their intended mission; they simply partook of their inheritance!!

Soren Kiekegaard viewed the Christian Church and most Christians as those who had received the inheritance -- but chose never to soar to the heights of their Master or their God-given mission! For Kiekegaard, the church too often never gets beyond its own barnyard; it never really shares the inheritance that it has been given as its mission of discipleship!

I am not as much of a cynic as Soren Kiekegaard! Too often theologians are too far removed from the real saints of the church. There have been many geese in this barnyard who have striven for the flight-pattern of their Master. And we can be truly thankful for the inheritance that they have left, for that inheritance has been sacrificially given in the name of Jesus Christ.

But regretfully -- there are many others in this place and in the whole Christian Church whose discipleship is little more than a yearly tax write-off. They write out their yearly check or two to God's work ... and then they think they've adequately responded to the inheritance God has given them! Be assured -- God is not greatly impressed with his sons or daughters who give token expressions to reduce income taxes RATHER THAN TO FORITFY HIS MISSION ON EARTH!!

God is not too humored by those who would classify his inheritance as part of their federal or state obligation! He desires that his inheritance be viewed with far more respect and reverence than an annual tax write-off.

Paul says - now if we are heirs ... and co-heir with Christ, then we certainly will not only share God's glory but also be willing to share in his sufferings! Paul is saying quite clearly: HAS NOT OUR ADOPTION AS CO-HEIRS WITH JESUS CHRIST MADE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT UPON OUR LIVES?? Is not this the

greatest inheritance that we could be given?? Have we not felt the intimacy of God's forgiving love? Is not our adoption as God's children ... our inheritance of God's grace WORTH MORE THAN AN ANNUAL TAX WRITE-OFF??

We all know the answer to these questions! The sanctuary of Jesus Christ is more than a barnyard for feeding just as the empty cross is more than a symbol of resurrection. That cross, whether hanging there or worn around our necks, is the affirmation of our inheritance -- and our affirming willingness to suffer and sacrifice for others in the name of Christ.

This is the active life of a true disciple -- for an active disciple not only sleeps secure with Christ, but is also one who is willing to suffer for Christ's sake.

As each of us completes our tax returns before next Sunday's deadline -- let us be mindful of the costly inheritance that Christ has given us as a gift ... and the kind of active return that he desires from his adopted children!

AMEN

LENT V  
HOPE Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 16, 1986  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

**"PRESSING TOWARD THE GOAL!"**

"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me. ... Forgetting what is behind and straining toward the goal ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."      Philippians 3:12-14

Peter Marshall, the great pastor of Washington's New York Avenue Presbyterian Church and chaplain to the Senate in the 40's, tells a tremendously moving story in his book, The Best of Peter Marshall. It is the story of a soldier, by rank a private in the midst of the battlefield. Let me share a piece of it:

... there in the trenches, kneeled a private in field-gray, his uniform stained with mud and blood. On his face, so young yet strangely marked with the lines of war, was a wistful faraway expression. He was enjoying the sunshine; the quiet of this strange lull in the firing. The heavy guns had been silent - there was an eerie stillness.

Suddenly a butterfly fluttered into view and alighted on the ground almost at the end of his rifle. It was a strange visitor to a battleground - so out of place - so out of keeping with rifles and bayonets, barbed wire and shell holes and twisted bodies. But there it was - a gorgeous creature, swaying in the warm breath of spring.

As the war-weary youngster watched the butterfly, he was no longer a private in field-gray. He was a boy once more, fresh and clean, swinging through a field, knee deep in clover and daisies. That strange visitor to the trench recalled for him his boyhood, when he had collected butterflies. It spoke to him of days of joy and peace. It was a symbol of the beauty and love of life. It was the emblem of the eternal, a reminder that there was still peace and beauty on earth -- somewhere there was color and fragility and flowers and gardens. He forgot the enemy a few hundred yards across this no-man's land. For that brief moment, he forgot the danger and privation and suffering. He was compelled by this butterfly.

With all the hunger of his heart ... with the resurrection of dreams and visions long gone by, he reached out his hand toward the butterfly. His fingers moved so slowly, so cautiously, lest he frighten away this visitor of peace. In showing this caution, he forgot another. The butterfly was just beyond his reach - so he stretched, forgetting that watchful eyes were waiting for a target.

Ever so slowly with infinite care and patience, he brought himself to within centimeters. Now he could almost touch the wings. So he reached for the wings, ... and then ... ping ...ing ...ing. The sniper's bullet found its mark. The stretching fingers relaxed ... the hand dropped flat. And for the private soldier in field-gray, the war was over. The official bulletin issued that day said: "All was quiet on the Western front..." And for the boy it was a quiet that no guns would ever break again.

There is always a risk when you and I reach for the beautiful ... the peace-giving ... the harmonious in life. When we reach for the Godly ... the ultimate ... the most fragrant of life - the risks are great!! You just can't escape it. When you reach for butterflies in life, sometimes you end up eating worms. Because the world says it's stupid to reach for butterflies. The world says, "Play it safe ... don't take any chances ... don't take any risks ... make sure you've got your rearend covered before you move." Above all, don't commit your life to Jesus Christ -- there's no earthly reward in that ... there's no pleasure in such a commitment ... that's pure stupidity ... because all you're gonna get is sacrifice and suffering.

Let's face it friends -- many of you would say that soldier was really stupid! Why reach for a butterfly on the battlefield?? Could anything be more ridiculous? Stay in the trenches! Play it safe! Don't be inspired any more by beauty or harmony or resurrection!! Only stupid people love and care and are inspired by beauty in this world. Get out there and do your duty ... shoot up the enemy ... kill, kill, kill!! But above all - don't let a vision of love or beauty get in the way of duty. Just get out there and live by the book ... the book of duty and rules and regulations and all that other boring garbage of life.

That's the way it is, isn't it?? In fact, that's the way many of us even live our faith. We go along with things as they are, but by jove -- don't get too committed to this "Christian thing." Don't really live by the perfection of Jesus Christ. Just attend church regularly. Put in a pittance of your income so that no one will give you any heat. Attend the "Yeshua" series so that everyone really thinks you're faithful and caring. Yes -- look good in the eyes of others -- fulfill your social duty religiously ... do you Christian duty, but don't go after any butterflies. Don't go after the real goal of your faith ... don't press on for the perfection of Jesus Christ. Just do enough to get by!

One thing's for certain these days, isn't it -- we don't have to worry about being Pharisaic -- of being accused of self-righteousness. We readily admit that "we are not perfect." But most of us are willing to stay right

there. The sad reality today is that no one seems to be reaching for perfection in their life and faith. They are totally satisfied with "imperfection" -- with leaving things just as they are. God's people are no longer reaching for the stars ... for the heights ... for the butterflies that are just beyond their grasp (even if it means suffering and sacrifice). We have become a church and a people who are satisfied with "business as usual" -- with "the average" -- with mediocrity.

One author has said the American people today suffer from acrophobia -- the fear of heights. Now I must admit - I have become one an acrophobic. I used to love heights -- but today I really feel insecure when looking down from places like the Sears Tower or John Hancock Bldg. But acrophobia is not only a fear of high mountains or jet flying. Far more devastating, it is a fear of high ideals, of high values, of high ambitions ... of living up to the life of Christ.

That's why a lot of agnostics want no part of the Christian faith -- because they know it calls for sacrifice and service and suffering. It calls for giving beyond the average call of duty. Yes - the facts are Christianity is not for everyone. It certainly is not for those who are sissies or who are afraid to admit their own imperfections. The Christian faith calls for real courage and guts -- it calls for honesty and faithfulness and dedication and loftiness. It calls for a willingness to admit one's fears and foibles. And ultimately - it calls for "losing one's life for the sake of Christ and others!" Who wants to do that kind of thing in a selfish, egotistical world like ours? Let's face it - most of us are in this world for ourselves. We're out to get our own jollies first, even if it means stepping on others, or divorcing others, or manipulating others to get there.

There is a great children's book ( I highly recommend) called, Hope for the Flowers. It's about a caterpillar named Stripe. Stripe was a regular guy. For a long time, he was satisfied being a caterpillar and eating leaves and flowers, etc. But he became dissatisfied! And in his great dissatisfaction, one day he saw a whole column of caterpillars climbing for greater things. Wow! That's what he wanted! He wanted greatness. And the only way it could be achieved was to get to the top of the caterpillar heap. So he climbed. And he scratched his way. He stepped on others. He beat and knocked others down. And he got closer and closer. But as he got near the top, the word got back to him: THERE WAS NOTHING UP THERE BUT LONELINESS AND ISOLATION. Getting to the top of the heap was not such a great thing afterall.

Fortunately, he had made a friend - her name was "Yellow." She had come to realization that "only in losing your old self could you become what God intended you to

to be. Obviously, for a caterpillar, that meant losing yourself in a cocoon. It meant giving up your caterpillar life. But in dying to the self in this way, there was also a rising to become something much greater -- the butterfly that God had intended you to be.

There is always a sacrifice when PRESSING TOWARD GOD'S GOAL for us. Whether believers or not, we all have trouble with sacrifice: we all figure our ideals are better than God's ideals for us. In short, most of us have fallen in love with what might be called "toyland." We have made this world's "playthings" our ultimate goal. A recent survey indicates that being successful in America now includes a three-bedroom home (with two baths), two cars, three tvs, eating out at least twice a week, insurance on all family members, an IRA and investment portfolio. Which one of us has not made these worldly playthings our ultimate goals. That's what I hear people talking about in social conversation. You're considered crazy today if you talk about sacrificing or giving up something or seeking the better life for mankind ... or for racial justice ... or for the sake of the poor.

We have made the whole goal and purpose of life TO BE HAPPY: to have a good time, to make money, and to live in ease and comfort. We all believe that this fantasy is the real meaning of life. But God never created us with "happiness" as the ultimate reason for life. Somehow we have come to believe that we have an absolute right to happiness and pleasure. The facts are that we have an absolute right to nothing!! Everything we have is a gift from God; we have nothing by absolute right. What we have is only by the grace of God.

We have no God-given right to be happy; we have only a God-given right to love and be merciful like him. And in so loving and showing mercy THEN WE CAN AND WILL BE HAPPY!! That's the ultimate goal and purpose of life! And those who are faithful to God are daily PRESSING TOWARD THIS GOAL!

Life is not a matter of claiming anything for ourselves, because everything on this earth is God's. And he has already claimed us by our baptism! In baptism, God has already assured us of the ultimate goal: LIFE EVERLASTING WITH HIM! But before we enjoy that resurrected life with him -- he has a race for us to run on earth. He wants us to perfect our lives like Christ -- not for his sake, but for the sake of the world. And as we perfect ourselves like Christ -- WE ARE PROMISED A PRIZE! Not salvation (gift), but harmony and wholeness and peace on earth -- these are the prizes of being perfect like Christ! What greater goal could we possibly achieve than the peace of Christ on earth? It's that kind of beauty and love and finish line toward which we are pressing!



That was the same goal toward which the young soldier was pressing. Some of us would say that he had failed because he died. But that is totally wrong. Because his cause in life was greater than merely doing his military duty. Even amidst the atrocities of war, he had not lost his ultimate love for beauty and wholeness and the goodness of creation. So even as he died seeking that beauty, he was PRESSING TOWARD THE GOAL of God's goodness and love and mercy in Jesus Christ. His country had called him to the duty of serving in a war. His God had called him to the perfection of loving the beauty of life even while at war. He lived and he died responding to the call of God's greater goal - loving the beauty and perfection of life even amidst the horror and death of war.

He will be remembered as one who loved God's beauty even as he did his duty. For what will you be remembered? Will you be one who will be remembered for reaching for the butterflies ... or merely one who succumbed to the duty of surviving in the trenches? Is your life goal one of reaching for the higher things ... or are you merely playing it safe in the trenches with your gun as your god?

AMEN.

MID LENT V  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 19, 1986  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## PASSAGES TO PARADISE

Looking Back With Integrity

To be aware of the passages of life is to be aware of the reality of separation. Much as we fear loss or change, or resist growth, renewal, or the unknown -- each new passage of life confronts us with the reality of separation from the familiar -- from what we once knew.

This truth is most graphically illustrated for me when I reflect back on my first romance. I hope you can remember yours; I certainly remember mine. She was two years older than me -- I was in 7th grade; she was in 9th. I'll never forget the first time she kissed me. Wow! I thought that I had been transported to paradise. The lights flashed; the sirens screamed; the blood boiled -- there couldn't possibly be a more perfect expression of love than what we were sharing. And what greater place than inside the side brick bellfry of good old St. John's Lutheran in Oshkosh. Do you remember the details of your first romance? It's amazing how we hang onto that trivia!

Well, I can't remember exactly - but I think the romance totalled something like six months or less. All I remember well is the pain of separation! It was devastating! No more holding hands ... no more hugs ... nor more kissing! How well I remember saying that "I'd never love anyone again!" There just couldn't be anyone better than "Kay!"

Well, you know the story -- it was the first passage of puppy love in my life. We've all had that puppy love passage. And few of us would say that it was not a painful separation. The separation from that first experience of emotional intimacy was really the pits. But with time and perspective - we all came to the realization that puppy love certainly was not paradise. It was an essential experience of growth and maturity - but it wasn't the ultimate meaning of life.

Then there was the passage of educational growth and achievement. High school, college, grad school and seminary -- each of them with special challenges yet many rewards. But as crucial as an education continues to be, it too had to be viewed as a passage of separation. There are few of us who can find ultimate meaning in being the "perennial, professional student."

Teaching and preaching became the next passage of life. For some 20 years now this job has been my primary passage.

There are certainly times that I live and act as if this job is the ultimate meaning of life. I mean, what could be greater than being pastor of Hope Lutheran Church?!? I'm sure I'm not alone -- many of you have allowed your jobs to define your existence and self-worth. But this job will also soon pass-away. One day the pain of separation will be very real for Peter and Hope Church (at least for me).

And then there will be yet new passages to face -- I hope. Possibly new congregations, possibly new avenues for ministry, possibly even some retirement years, maybe even a decade to perfect my golf game and finish reading the books that I've only started. But this passage will also confront me with the ultimate separation -- the separation from life itself. There is possibly nothing more fearful or real than the separation from life on this earth. And yet that passage is exactly the reality that each one of the previous passages has reflected. From puppy love to the inability to hit a golf ball, each reality of separation has spoken the same message: PHYSICAL THINGS AND PHYSICAL LIFE IS NOT FOREVER!

There comes a time when each of us is forced to look back and ask: What is lasting? What is eternal? What does not or will not change? What really has made a difference? There is only one answer to these questions: the love of God through Jesus Christ. That is the only reality that is not affected by all the multitude of life's passages.

As Christians, to live with integrity is to recognize and celebrate this relationship from the time it is given -- in Baptism. In Holy Baptism, God integrates us with himself forever. We are united to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God promises that nothing will ever separate us from the love of Christ. That's why Paul said: "What shall separate you from the love of God? Shall tribulation or distress? Shall peril or nakedness or even death? Absolutely not! There is nothing in all creation which will separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus!"

That Word ... that promise is the only word that overcomes the separations of life. It is the only Word that is victorious over our many passages of separation. It is the only Word that can be called Good News in the face of death, because it is a word of integration rather than disintegration.

God has given us this Word so that we can look back at any point in our lives - regardless of its pain or separation - and feel connected. We celebrate passages as God-given realities of growth and separation. But we live confident that nothing will ever separate us from Him ... we live and die integrated to Him and his love. Isn't it fantastic that God has given us our passage to paradise and not just another case of short-term, puppy love?!? AMEN.

LENT V  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 20, 1988  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

**"GETTING TO THE HEART OF IT ALL!"**

"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Jer. 31:33

The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. ...  
If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, the Father will honor him." John 12:29

Isn't it amazing - God gives us the most precious gifts of creation, our children, but he doesn't give us a manual with them. Almost everything else comes with a manual. You buy a new computer -- you get a 2000 page manual on how to use it. You buy a new car, a new VCR, new cupboards, a typewriter ... almost anything ... and you always get an owner's manual. But with the most intricate gift, the most complicated creation - human beings - we get no manual. Is it any wonder that someone has said having children is not for the faint-hearted. That same author said, "Children may be deductible, but they are also very taxing!!"

Or there's the story of the mother with four small children at home. A friend had given her a play pen when the fourth child arrived. She wrote in her thank you note: "I love it. I sit down in the middle of it in the living room ... and the children can't get to me for hours!!"

Today, Jeremiah describes the relationship between God and humanity much the same as that between parent and child. As parents, we are constantly seeking to give the right rules, the proper discipline, the best directions, the ultimate guidance ... all with the hope that these will serve as a manual for future behavior. God has done very much the same for all of us. He has given us the very best guidelines life could be given - THE TEN COMMANDMENTS! Pastor Bob referred to these guidelines two weeks ago as our greatest treasure (although sometimes hidden). But no matter how great the parental discipline ... no matter how treasured the rules may be ... no matter how intricate the manual seeks to be -- the rule book falls short!! It's never quite perfect enough ... it never perfectly yields the behavior that we want from it. Is it any wonder that God finally says through Jeremiah ... there's a day coming when you will no longer need an eternal rule book - because my law of love will be written in your hearts!!

Jeremiah illustrates one of the greatest truths of existence -- THERE COMES A TIME WHEN WE'VE GOT TO GET TO THE HEART OF IT ALL!! There comes a time when all the manuals and

rule books in the world won't change anyone. There comes a time when we've got to get beyond the head ... and recognize the importance of the heart. Because no matter how well we know it in the head, we may never reflect it in the way we live. That's why St. Paul said, "The things I know I should do I do not do, and the things I know I should not do, those things I do!!" Having all the right intellectual systems in the world does not guarantee that humanity will follow those rules. That's the condition known as SIN! And no rule book, no matter how perfect it may be, has ever been able to wipe away this condition of sin!

So what does God do with this condition?? Does he come up with a new rule book that will transform sin? Does he develop a manual that will eliminate all evil from our lives? Does he finally give us a technological system that will guarantee a sin-free world?? Nothing of the kind!! God knows that sin cannot be wiped away through any perfect intellectual system ...through any perfect manual or rule book. There is only one way to transform sin ... HE HAD TO GIVE HIMSELF IN PLACE OF IT!! Instead of another set of rules, he had to glorify the meaning of those rules with his own sacrifice. That's the ultimate system of love ... THE SELF-SACRIFICE OF GOD'S OWN PERSON!!

There is no way to write that system out in a manual. The HEART of love is not a matter of crossing all the "t's" or dotting all the "i's" -- it's a matter of living for the good of others ... OF BEING A SERVANT!! It's not a matter of the head, but rather a heart-felt reality. GETTING TO THE HEART OF IT ALL is the only way to transform sin. And what does that mean -- it means being convicted from your gut not only being directed by the mind. "Having Jesus in your heart" means that sacrificial love is always the first expression of your life. It's not knowing what is right from a manual or rule book ... it's knowing what is right because it is an expression of love. It's an internal conviction of love that does not change because of external circumstances.

Maybe the story of the little girl and her kitten best illustrates the point. A little 7-yr old girl had adopted a bedraggled, fiesty old Tom cat that had been making the rounds of the neighborhood. After months of tender, caring love -- that old Tom cat just purred pretty for that little girl. One day old Tom was struck and killed by a passing car. Trying to assuage the little girl's grief, her grandmother went out and bought her an elegant, expensive Persian feline. But the little girl wouldn't even hold it. Finally Grandma said, "I don't understand you, child; you took that common old cat and cuddled and treasured it; now you have the most elegant cat to be had, and you won't even touch it." The little girl cleared her throat and said, "But Grandma, it's what's inside the cat that counts!"

It's what we reflect from the inside that is so much more important than merely looking good on the outside. This month has been a banner month for marriages here at Hope. It has again reminded me that here's another important reality without a really perfect manual. Oh, I dare not fool any of you -- there are all kinds of manuals for marriage. They tell prospective brides and grooms about colors and cakes and candles ... about dresses and dances and duties of this person and that ... they talk about tableware and tuxedos and honeymoon trips ... they prescribe all the right rules for matrimonial moonlight. They tell us how to make it look right, make it feel respectable, and make it sound religious -- but they never GET TO THE HEART OF IT ALL!! They fail to emphasize that MARRIAGE IS AN INTERNAL CONVICTION OF LOVE, NOT A POMPOUS PARADE OF PRETTY PEOPLE IN A PRETTY SETTING WITH EVERYTHING ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING PRETTY AND PROPER!!

Allen Puffenberger, a methodist pastor, writes on today's text: "Some of the churches and sects growing the fastest in our society demand that members adhere to very rigid rules and regulations. When everything seems to be up in the air, people are easily attracted to groups that seemed to have it all nailed down! Unfortunately, these groups are ruled by the same egotistical pride that ruled the Pharisees ... they were only concerned with what showed on the outside.

Puffenberger goes on: One of the greatest expressions of sin is that "people turn rules and regulations into ends in themselves. They abide by the letter of the law and totally miss the spirit of the law. And it is the spirit of the law that God puts into our hearts." THE LETTER OF THE LAW IS TO SHOW US LOVE; THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW IS TO MAKE US LOVE. If we only have the letter without the spirit -- we HAVE NOT GOTTEN TO THE HEART OF IT ALL!

Jeremiah said that God gave us the law as a manual of love. But then he went further - he promised us the spirit of the law. Then he fulfilled that promise in the life of Jesus Christ through his death on the cross. The death of Jesus Christ transforms us from being merely head people into heart people ... because we always recognize that the head is never enough!! TRUE LOVE ALWAYS COMES FROM THE HEART (GUT)!

One only needs to look at Hope Lutheran Church. This is not a perfect community of faith. We seek to abide by God's rules and regulations in this place, but we have not been able to live by them perfectly. We need only look at the staff to see that. The pastors are hardly perfect ... they don't give perfect sermons, they don't live perfectly moral lives, and they certainly are no where near as PERFECTLY handsome as the TV evangelists. Likewise, our musical program is not flawless ... our educational program does not reflect pure wisdom ... and moreover, our members are not perfectly committed,

especially when it comes to giving like Christ. Our liturgy is less than perfect, our building is imperfect and sometimes inadequate, and we never live up to the expectations of what everyone wants and expects from us! But one thing I can say is near perfect within this house of God ... as least from the perspective of most of the staff: WE DO ATTEMPT TO LOVE FROM THE HEART! That's the greatest attribute that a church can reflect -- GETTING TO THE HEART OF GOD ... AND GIVING THAT SAME HEART TO OTHERS! When someone asks, what does Hope Church stand for ... I CAN CONFIDENTLY SAY:

the forgiving love of Jesus Christ ...  
the compassionate concern of Jesus Christ ...  
the sacrificial dedication of Jesus Christ ...  
and the benevolent kindness of Jesus Christ.

We certainly haven't perfected any of those traits of Christ, but we are trying TO GET TO THE HEART OF THEM ALL! Unlike days gone by, no one can any longer say that Hope Church is a congregation that is only concerned about the externals of looking good or having the most wealthy membership!! Those were the days when we were following the cultural rule book of sociological status rather than the heart of the gospel! That's NOT the goal of this community today. Today we lift high the cross as a symbol of identity. Today our "hope" is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ and his righteousness - the righteousness of the sacrificial love of the cross!

Let's fact it - the cross has been a powerful symbol for centuries. It was once an object of horror, an instrument of torture and death. But Jesus went beyond Jeremiah -- he prophesied that his atoning crucifixion would transform the cross into a powerful positive symbol: "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself."

And so how do we find the cross today? Just look around and you will see its prominence in this place. Look at the altar ... look above the altar ... look on the font ... look on the pews ... look at the paraments ... look at the hymnals ... look on the Christian flag ... look at the windows ... look at the steeple ... look around my neck!! But then, pause with me and ask yourself the most important question: IS THE CROSS IN THE MOST IMPORTANT PLACE OF YOUR LIFE -- YOUR HEART -- THE VERY GUTS OF YOUR LIFE???

The cross I am wearing today is a wedding cross. It was made by a member of my former congregation. To most of you, it's just an external symbol of love. But to Arlene and me -- it represents so very much more!! For I walked with Arlene through a very sticky divorce ... and then years later, I walked with Arlene through a marvelous new marriage. And to symbolize the very heart ... the very guts of our relationship ... Arlene melted down some of her best silver place settings

to fashion this cross. This is more than an external symbol of love and marriage -- this cross represents the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ ... it represents not only Arlene's silver, but hours and hours of her time, hours and hours of our struggle, hours and hours of sacrificial renewal leading to a new marriage!! It is more than an external symbol of Christian love -- it is the very heart of Jesus Christ shared by Arlene and me. THAT'S GETTING TO THE HEART OF IT ALL.

And that's why we are here today -- to get beyond the rule books, to see farther than the imperfect manuals of discipline, to move beyond the externals of religion and worship and liturgy -- to GET TO THE HEART OF IT ALL -- THE LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST GIVEN AS A GIFT ... TO BE SHARED AS HIS SERVANTS FOR OTHERS!!

AMEN.



LENT V  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 12, 1989  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

**"THE WINNING WAY!"**

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ has already made me his own. ... so, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.  
Philippians 3:11-14

One of the greatest truths of life is that we all like to be winners. We like to be on top ... to be number one. Even as we pastors played Channel 13 a couple of weeks ago, it was Peter Martyn urging that we put our #1 team back on the court "so that we could win the game."

In David Fisher's book, Remembrance of Past Swings, he tells about baseball stadiums before there were permanent seats in the outfield. At that time, teams were allowed to erect temporary bleachers or simply put up a rope for a large crowd. And any ball hit into that area was ruled a ground-rule double. When Ty Cobb was managing the Tigers - if they were facing a power-hitting team, Cobb would have the ground crew set up temporary bleachers -- turning long ground balls into ground-rule doubles rather than home runs.

In Chicago - Cub's fans standing behind the outfield rope would push forward when the home team was up to bat thereby shortening the field. When the visitors came to bat, the fans would take several steps backward -- making it more difficult for the opponents to hit home runs.

When Bill Veeck owned the Cleveland Indians - he moved the outfield fences in or out depending on the line-up of the visiting team. When the league finally prohibited that - Veeck came up with a new strategy. At night, he would go to the ballpark and dig up home plate ... moving it forward or backward depending upon the visiting team.

But of course, cheating to win has not been limited to the good ole days. During the recent Olympics, drug testing for steroids was the biggest news story of the games. At any cost, some athletes jeopardize their bodies JUST TO WIN.

Last Sunday night, some of us watched the TV docudrama "One Day" - the story of the development of the A-Bomb in America. This drama vividly portrayed our desire to WIN BIG in Japan. Even when our intelligence indicated that the Japanese were beaten and ready to surrender, dropping the big one was not stopped. Sometimes, even when we have the opposition down on their knees, we aren't satisfied unless WE TOTALLY DESTROY THEM. WE LIKE TO WIN BIG!!

This past week, Susan was in Washington D.C. for an American Law Institute meeting. Another lawyer-mom on the committee indicated that in Washington D.C. "she could find only one pre-school that encouraged play-time as a primary activity of pre-school." All the other pre-schools emphasized "structured academics." She said that the teachers in the D.C. area consider you a LOSER-AS-A-MOM if your child is not enrolled in "competitive academics." From pre-school on, kids learn that winners only get straight A's.

Have I made my point? We live in an age where we will do anything to win -- in sports, in business, in politics, in personal relationships, and even in religion. Every week I get new propaganda from various church growth enthusiasts. Basically, their message is the same: WINNERS are only those churches who are SCORING BIG -- BIG NUMBERS & BIG DOLLARS!

Obviously, competition is essential in many areas of life. In sports, it is a prime motivator. Anyone who knows me well knows that I am a "born competitor." I like healthy competition. But when it comes to the most important goal of life -- our relationship to God thru Jesus Christ -- then we've got to get BEYOND RAW SCORES, BEYOND BIG NUMBERS, BEYOND A TOP DOG MENTALITY. From a faith perspective, THE WINNING WAY goes well beyond a top-dog disciple OR the congregation that scores the most new members.

In fact, God RUNS totally contrary to the racetrack of the world -- he wipes away the competitive dynamic. He doesn't wait for anyone to get to the finish line -- HE DECLARES EVERYONE WINNERS RIGHT FROM THE START!! How's that for a topsy, turvy marketing mentality!! St. Paul says in today's text: "Christ Jesus has already made us his very own!" He has already achieved the victory for us. As Pastor Bob stated so clearly last week: "the first priority is God's ... HE CHOOSES US AND MAKES US WINNERS BEFORE WE EVEN HAVE A CHANCE TO MAKE HIM OUR CHOICE! God takes the first step: He graces us! He offers us his victorious love! He scores for us the greatest victory of life -- he lays down his life for our sake on the cross. He saves us unconditionally!

God says in no uncertain terms: NO LONGER DO I WANT YOU CHEATING IN ORDER TO WIN THE VICTORY! No longer do I want you being sinfully selfish in order to achieve my righteousness! I WILL MAKE YOU MY OWN RIGHT NOW! I WILL PROMISE YOU THE VICTORY OF RESURRECTION RIGHT NOW!! I WILL AWARD YOU THE VERY PRIZE FOR WHICH YOU ARE COMPETING -- THE ASSURANCE OF YOUR SALVATION ... MY LOVE AND MY ACCEPTANCE. That's what this Baptism business is all about -- it's God's gift of victory!! He gives us the ultimate prize even before we've earned anything ... he declares us winners at the starting line. We are righteous not because of our own perfection or good deeds -- but because Christ has been perfectly righteous for us! Now that's GOOD NEWS -- worth more than anything in the world!

So, now that we are already DECLARED WINNERS - WHAT'S LEFT? Where's the motivator? Where's the stimulator? Without the competitive edge -- how in the world does God expect us to do anything??

That brings us to God's pure genius. God doesn't want us merely shooting for a few finish lines in our lives. God doesn't want us merely going after a prize at the end of life's rainbow. GOD'S GOAL IS RIGHT NOW -- HE WANTS US TO SHOW OURSELVES EVERY DAY AS WINNERS!! No longer are we as Christians seeking some kind of end result ... some kind of pie in the sky by and by -- WE ARE SEEKING TO REFLECT HIS CHARACTER AND LIFESTYLE RIGHT NOW. Because, as Paul says, "we are already in Christ ... and Christ is already in us!!"

So, we are no longer merely striving to win way down the road -- we are striving to show that we have already won! THE WINNING WAY, THE WINNING EDGE, THE WINNING POWER HAS ALREADY BEEN GIVEN TO US. The "upward call" ... the "prize of God" is to show THAT WE POSSESS THE WINNING WAY! As Paul says, we are pressing on for THAT goal ... to show that we are ALREADY STRAINING FORWARD ... that we are ALREADY becoming more mature in the love, ALREADY PRESSING TOWARD the upward call of Christ. That's what is now of surpassing worth to us. No longer are we just going after a one time finish line, we are now going after THE WINNING WAY every day.

The goal is more than winning a medal - the goal is wearing the medal ... LIVING LIKE A WINNER ... LIVING THE VICTORIOUS LOVE OF CHRIST ... LIVING A LOVE WHICH SERVES AND SACRIFICES AND SATISFIES FOR THE HUNGERS OF OTHERS. No longer is it a matter of pushing and shoving and cheating to get to the finish line -- now it is a matter of uplifting and upholding and serving others who are struggling along the way. THAT'S THE WINNING WAY OF SURPASSING WORTH. And to be that kind of winner sometimes means coming in last -- because we are so busy helping others who are struggling along the way.

And isn't that exactly what we mean when we teach our children "good team spirit." GOOD TEAM SPIRIT doesn't mean that we always score the most points or come out on top. GOOD TEAM SPIRIT means that we play our very best, we play our best sportsmanship, we play fair and honorable, we play not for our own glory but for the good of the whole team. That's the WINNING WAY. And many times playing that WINNING WAY means that we lose ... we don't get the highest score, we don't always come out on top. But it's still the WINNING WAY.

In fact, when running on God's racetrack, sometimes we lose badly ... but we still win in his way of love, duty, honor, and faithfulness. That was faithfully shown after the bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut. Two hundred fifty American Marines were killed in that bombing; and many more were wounded. On national TV coverage of the tragedy, General Paul Kelley was leaning over a young marine who had been blinded by the explosion. He also suffered a tracheotomy and could not speak. As Kelley bent over him, the young marine

reached up and touched the four stars on the general's shoulder. Just two days later, the marine celebrated his birthday. General Kelley came back and presented his four stars to the young soldier. The General said: "Son, we're proud of you -- you have served and sacrificed for your country." The young man couldn't speak ... nor could he see - but he motioned for a pencil and paper. And then he scribbled two words ... the two words that lived by as a marine: SEMPER FIDELIS, always faithful!!

That's the WINNING WAY -- faithfulness to the VICTORY OF GOD ... to his principles of love, justice, mercy, and honor. A faithfulness that is never ONE BIG WIN ... a faithfulness that never guarantees that we will be on top ... but a faithfulness that surpasses all the worth of winning by merely the numerical statistics of the world.

Yes, like that young marine -- sometimes the WINNING WAY is only known after a tremendous loss. That was certainly the case for St. Paul. St. Paul had lost all the winning credentials of his culture ... his Jewish identity, his parentage, his inheritance, his rabbinic background as a Pharisee, his status as a leading Jew. But his greatest gain was that he now had the identity of an eternal winner - Jesus Christ. Nothing surpassed that worth ... because there was no identity, no inheritance, no parentage THAT OFFERED A GREATER LIFE OF VICTORY THAN THE LOVE OF CHRIST.

Many of you remember the story of Astronaut Buzz Aldrin, the second man to step on the moon. On an NBC TODAY show, he told of his years of education, hard work, dreams and discipline in preparing for his historic mission with Neil Armstrong to the moon. During the interview, Aldrin also told of his emotional breakdown and painful recovery. His crisis had nothing to do with space travel or weightlessness. Aldrin said the breakdown resulted from the terrible disillusionment of WORKING SO HARD FOR ONE BIG VICTORY... ONE BIG GOAL ... AND THEN WHEN IT WAS OVER, THE TREMENDOUS LETDOWN OF EMPTINESS! His dream, his victory, his being at the top ... was not everlasting ... it was but a moment of victory.

THE WINNING WAY is not reaching the moon ... or any other momentary HIGH OR BIG SCORE. The WINNING WAY is maturing every day in the love of Christ ... a power that has been given and that can be improved upon each and every day.

I sincerely hope that you jocks in this room will continue to play for victories in your sports. Likewise, I hope the same is true for everyone in business, education or whatever field of aspiration -- we all need to score big once and awhile. But beyond these periodic victories - I hope you prize ABOVE ALL the surpassing worth of having an identity with Jesus Christ! For living every day in the expression of his love is truly THE WINNING WAY. And that's the only victory that WILL NEVER BE TAKEN AWAY!!

AMEN.

LENT V  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
April 5, 1992  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## "FORGETTING WHAT LIES BEHIND"

Thus says the Lord: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing."  
Is. 43:17 Not that I have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ has made me his own. ... forgetting what lies behind and straining to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal - the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ. Phil. 3:12-13 (So the owner) will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others. ... (for) the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Luke 20:17f

For those of us who were once Packer-backers, the gospel of Lombardi has almost as many Wisconsin followers as the Gospel of Luke. And Lombardi once it this way: "We know how rough the road ahead will be, how heavy the load will be, and how the barricades will be waiting for us along the track - but we have set our souls upon a certain goal ahead ... and nothing left from hell to sky shall ever get us to look back." Having come to coach the Packers after many dismal seasons, Lombardi would not allow the Packers to BECOME CAPTIVE TO THEIR PAST FAILURES. He literally taught: FORGET WHAT LIES BEHIND!

Each of us knows, and esp. those of us who have played sports, how easy it is to BECOME CAPTIVE TO THE PAST, ESP. OUR PAST FAILURES. In my junior year of high school football, Oshkosh High was graced with one of the fastest, biggest & meanest fullbacks, the most highly rated quarterback, and one of the biggest and best offensive lines in the Fox Valley Conf. But, we lost our first conference game. And for the rest of the season, we could not FORGET WHAT WAS LYING BEHIND ... we simply could not let go of that first, humiliating defeat.

Imagine if the FAB FIVE of Michigan had become captive to their past. I'm not talking about poverty or inner city captivity. I'm talking about ego-captivity! Four of those five freshman were among the top twelve high school athletes in the country when they came to Michigan. Imagine, if what they brought to Michigan was only the glory of their past; only infatuation with what was behind; imagine if each one viewed himself as the greatest gift given to Michigan.

Before those FAB FIVE could play Michigan basketball -- THEY EACH HAD TO DIE TO THEMSELVES: to be freed from the ego-centricity of past infatuation and glory. They each had to envision a higher calling ("heavenly calling") -- to be a committed to a new team spirit - committed to working and sweating and sharing a new common cause. To be a part of Michigan, no longer was "the me or the I" the focus ... now the focus had to be "the team, the good of Michigan, and not merely myself!" These fabulous freshmen had to learn a lesson that

many people don't learn in a lifetime -- "to forget about all the glory that lies behind - and to start looking to a new vision of teamwork for the future." It appears that the Fab Five are learning their lesson well ... they even learned to "forget about" those two earlier defeats to Ohio State in the game last Sunday night. Now Duke will test them as to whether they have FORGOTTEN WHAT LIES BEHIND.

"NOT BEING CAPTIVE TO THE GLORY, THE GUILT OR THE GRIME OF YESTERDAY" - that is the "new thing" that God is constantly doing of which Isaiah speaks in today's text. Isaiah, Paul and Luke harmonize one message today: GOD SEEKS TO FREE US FROM CAPTIVITY - captivity to the oppression from others, captivity to self-sufficiency & self-glorification, and captivity to sin, guilt and other failures of yesterday. That's the new thing that God is doing for Israel. She had become captive and held down by the foreign, oppressive power of Babylon. Such captivity had lead her people to hopelessness and defeatism.

What was true for Israel is no different for you or for me. If someone is always on our backs -- beating us down ... only demonstrating our faults and weaknesses ... forever belittling and mocking us as nobodies - the result will be despair and dejection. God cannot tolerate that kind of murderous activity within his vineyard. He will keep on sending messengers who will cultivate his vision of a "new thing" - a vision of hope and mercy, a vision which brings good tidings to the afflicted, a mercy which binds up the brokenhearted, and a hope which proclaims liberty to all held captive by any demonic power.

Some of you may remember Archibald Rutledge's story of capturing and caging a mocking-bird. On the second day of captivity, the young mocking-bird's mother flew to her offspring with food in her bill. Rutledge was ecstatic; he was sure the mother's feeding was better than his. But the next morning he found his pathetic little captive dead. Arthur Wayne, a renowned ornithologist, told him: "A mother mocking-bird, finding her young held captive in a cage, will sometimes take it poison berries. She thinks its better for one she loves to die rather than to be held in captivity."

That is the "new thing" - the "new Spirit" - that God pours into the hearts of every one of his children. That is the spirit that God gives every person in Baptism (to Stephanie Anne today). He says, "I will set you free of anyone or anything that holds you down - that causes you to be hopeless and despairing - that makes you want to die rather than live in praise & thanksgiving. God's vision is that his children shall be free from anything that would make them less than his image of grace, mercy, goodness and love in this world.

That's why we say that God was present when the bricks were being removed from the Berlin Wall. God was present when the lone student defied the tank in Tieneman Square. God was present when Terry Anderson walked out of his prison cell in Beirut as a free man. God was present when the feeding tube was removed from the seven-yr vegetative limbo of Nancy Cruzan.

God is always present whenever there is a NEW EXPRESSION of victory over defeat, of hope over despair, of an empty tomb over a crucified corpse.

So, how does all of this apply to you and me? Since you and I have received the waters of baptism ... since we are already "in Christ" - how have we manifested this "new thing" of God in our lives? Or to put this whole thing in the metaphor of the Final Four: through the cross of Jesus Christ, we have already been declared THE BIG WINNERS. We don't have to make a trip to the Minneapolis Metrodome - God has already freed us from what lies behind! /// Well, why in God's name then do we live and act like such BIG LOSERS -- clinging onto life's defeats and grief, glued to past guilts and grudges, forever acting as if the grease, the grime and the painful grit of life cannot be washed away! We seemingly need a whole new view of WINNING AND LOSING.

So, what does it mean to WIN BY GOD'S SPIRIT? Quite simply, it means that we don't have to score the most points or have the biggest budgets or boast of the most members. We are freed from that old obsession which says that only the most points, biggest team or most numbers wins. The "new thing" - the "new spirit" - simply means that we play life's game THE VERY BEST WE CAN. It's not only scoring points that counts, now we're more concerned about scoring assists for others, more concerned about helping to rebound for the team, more concerned about passing the ball to others to give them good shots. In short, being freed from having to get all the glory for myself, and then willingly giving the glory to God who has giving us OUR GIFTS & HIS NEW SPIRIT in the first place.

That's the new thing of which Isaiah, Paul and Luke speak today: it's the WINNING SPIRIT THAT DIES TO SELF ... AND LIVES AND FORGIVES AND SHARES AND CARES FOR OTHERS. It's the winning spirit of our God who never gives up on us ... even after we enter the vineyard and act like MURDERING losers - giving one another the poison darts of anger, resentment, and hostility ... holding onto grudges and guilts of the past ... and time after time, resisting this "new spirit" of sacrifice "that Christ has given to each of us." How tragic - God begins in Baptism to pour his WINNING SPIRIT into our lives; then he nurtures that same new spirit through parents, grandparents and godparents; then he sustains that spirit through Sunday School and Bible School and catechism; then he feeds that very WINNING SPIRIT directly into our bodies time after time after time at his dinner table ... and yet, we still walk away from his sanctuary and act like LOSERS day after day after day.

As the gospel of PEANUTS puts it - Lucy gets livid with her mother: "But mom, you promised me a birthday party; and now you say my selfishness has changed your mind. It's just not fair!" At this point, Linus intervenes with the vision of a "new day." saying: "Lucy, you're not using the right strategy. Just go to your mom and tell her "you're sorry" - admit that you were selfish and she was right to cancel your party - and from now on, you'll try to be less selfish." Lucy stands with a grimace on

her face as she ponders Linus' strategy. Then finally, she cries out: "I'd rather die, than say I'm sorry!"

That's the spirit of TRUE LOSERS: I'd rather die than say I'm sorry!" That's what happens to LOSERS who can no longer "forget what lies behind" - THEY BECOME CAPTIVE TO YESTERDAY'S DEFEATS, DESPAIR, AND DAMNATION. You hear them saying: "I'd rather die, than forgive her!" "I'd rather die, than go for help! I'd rather die, than give up my grudge! I'd rather die, than recognize anyone else's need for love & support. I'd rather die, than do it your way! I'd rather die, than give you the satisfaction of the time of day." THIS DEADLY SPIRIT IS VERY MUCH ALIVE TODAY. It's the spirit so often seen in the media toward public personalities. It's the spirit that seeks to always "dredge up dirt from the past," rather than believing that "in Christ, all things can be made new & different." It's a LOSING SPIRIT that you and I have become accustomed to hearing day after day after day! It's even a spirit that has lived and continues to live right here at Hope Church -- people who have not yet "forgotten what lies behind" -- holding onto old grudges, holding onto mean-spirited attitudes and views, acting as if nothing new has been done by God or his messengers since the struggles of the 60's! It's bad enough when a culture seeks to be sustained on guilt and grudges; but nothing is more tragic than followers of Jesus Christ who will not forget what lies behind.

Lent makes us particularly aware of such LOSERS. It reminds us that such folks are the ones who have often stood at a distance around the cross of Calvary. Sometimes they are there to spew their vomit of demonic hate and revenge; other times they just show their captivity to arrogance and greed. But they don't let anyone forget that the cross is not only a symbol of death, but it's their obsession with torture as well. That's the goal of all TRUE LOSERS -- to torture & crucify life!

But through the dark clouds overhanging Calvary - God the Father reached down and touched that same torturous tree. And through his touch, that symbol of separation became a sign of salvation. And so we praise God in Lent for the cross. We praise him for the death of our Lord. Because we have seen beyond the twisted, tortured body of a victim on the cross. God has again done a "new thing" -- he has made a LOSER INTO A WINNER, he has turned A VICTUM into A VICTOR. He has again shown what his power overcomes the forces of defeat and despair in this world. He has forgotten what lies behind, and offered us his transformation for tomorrow -- the assurance that his LOVE, MERCY & FORGIVENESS will make all things new!!

Like Paul, none of us have reached that perfect goal of this NEW SPIRIT OF GOD. But since we have all been washed in that spirit, there is only one way to go: TO PRESS ON TO MAKE IT OUR OWN, BECAUSE CHRIST HAS MADE US HIS OWN ... forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead: WE OFFER GOD'S PRIZE OF GRACE, MERCY & LOVE TO THE WORLD!!

AMEN.



LENT V  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
April 2, 1995  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## "LETTING GO, YET HOLDING ON!"

*Thus says the Lord ... "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; ... Isaiah 43:16a;17 Not that I have already attained (resurrection) or have already reached this goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own; ... so, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Phil. 3:11-14*

While *Forrest Gump*, *Pulp Fiction* and many others claimed the Academy Awards this past week, I for the first time watched a movie called *Renaissance Man* directed by Penny Marshall and starring Danny DeVito (that should tell all of you how far behind I am in "movie watching"). *Renaissance Man* was not a box-office-crusher like *Gump*, but it was truly a movie with great redeeming value. As you may know, Danny DeVito played an aspiring "Ad Man" from downtown Detroit's Renaissance Center. Like any good advertising executive, he was trying to land another major account when he got grid-locked in Detroit traffic. The loss of that one deal led to his demise with the agency and put him in the unemployment lines for the first time.

I found it particularly intriguing that a man of DeVito's stature was cast as this aspiring ad man. It is the classic story of the "little man" seeking to show himself as the "big man" in the world. Whether its Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* or Danny DeVito in *Renaissance Man*, the obsession with "appearing to be impressive and important" is the theme not only of these dramas, but of much of the world around us. **Things haven't changed much in the history of civilization. God chose little Israel to be his light of goodness and mercy to all nations. But instead Israel interpreted her "chosenness" as a sign of being impressive and important and above-reproach in the world.** So Israel was constantly at odds and often in captivity to other great nations because she was obsessed with impressiveness and self-importance. Is it any wonder that Isaiah had God telling Israel "I am about to do a new thing!"

Need I even say that our society's goals haven't changed much in over 2500 years since this prophecy from Isaiah. Like Danny DeVito or Israel, "little men/women/nations/ peoples" are still trying to appear as "Big Men/Women/Nations" - whether on campus, in corporations, or around the globe. Humanity continues to be obsessed with himself/herself/ itself or themselves (as is so obvious today with all the gender and ethnic and other battles for prominence). **One cannot speak today as a public servant without stepping on somebody's toes.** Everyone is trying to boast to everyone else that "I am the most impressive, the most dynamic, the most educated, the most powerful, the most suave thing that God has ever created." Obviously, there is nothing inherently wrong with being impressive or important or even powerful. But when a person makes these ego/ethnic/gender traits the whole essence of his/her life, then, like DeVito, we see a person who is setting himself/herself up for a fall. I truly believe that's one of the major

reasons that several of the highly picked NCAA teams are not among the final four this weekend: **they allowed their own self-estimation of power and impressiveness to knock them down!** Maybe this same thing will happen to the Johnny-Come-Too-Lately Baseball players. Whatever, it's as old as the Bible itself: **"over cockiness (known as the sin of false pride and arrogance) always leads to a fall.**

St. Paul was very much aware of that false pride and arrogance from his earlier life as a Jewish Pharisee. He too had once clung to family lineage, national nobility, Pharisaic prominence, public pompousness and religious rules. He knew the meaning of the symbols of success; he knew the "grounds for boasting" among the elite of his culture. But through his Damascus experience, he had also come to know that the ways that "little men/women" become "big men/women" are very temporary and short-lived in this world. So he said, *"I have suffered the loss of all these things ... all this prominence ... I regard these things as rubbish ... for I do not consider that I have made any of this on my own ... so forgetting what lies behind, I strain forward to what lies ahead."* In order to find himself, Paul had to first lose himself in Christ, eg, he had to "let go" of his own egocentric obsession of being "the big man" in God-country.

In the same way, Danny DeVito went from "powerful ad man" to "civilian instructor in the Army" -- hardly a position where he saw himself any longer as the "big man" on 5th Avenue. Not only did he have to teach (which he had never done before), but his class was made up of eight persons called "Double D's"--Dumb as Dogpoop! His job was to help these "Double D's" think on their feet - to correlate muscle with brains. He first assigned them to write: "Why I Joined the Army!" Upon hearing their stories -- **stories about parental abuse, family chaos in the ghetto, gang killings, constant mobility and homelessness** -- DeVito was at last moved to have compassion for these others rather than being stuck on only "pity for himself." Using Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, DeVito began to lose himself by finding in *Hamlet* a vision of Christ's love/compassion for each one of the Double D's. **Instead of looking at the failure of his life behind him, DeVito and friends began to press toward the goal of redeeming their lives.** No longer would the Army slogan, "Be All You Can Be," remain just a slogan; it was now DeVito's mission to help each of these BE ALL HE/SHE COULD BE!

There are times we're all like those Double D's: we forget that God has already blessed us (as he does for Jenna today) with the ultimate prize: **the assurance that we will always be His!** With God, we "little people" no longer have to prove that we are "Big People." God has already made us as **BIG** as anyone can be: **he has given us the potential to become just like Jesus Christ!** And no one can get any bigger than Jesus Christ!

But before we can enjoy the fulness of that resurrected life - he has a race for us to run on earth. He calls us to show **the bright side** rather than the **dark side** of our humanness: **WE ARE CALLED TO SHOW THE LIGHT OF CHRIST!** We don't do this for God's sake, we do this for the sake of the

world. Like DeVito, we don't do this for salvation (that's already given); we do this to bring greater harmony, wholeness and peace on earth (just as DeVito did for his class of Double D's).

Peter Marshall has told a different but maybe even more gripping Army story than Penny Marshall's *Renaissance Man*. Part of his story goes like this:

... there in the trenches kneeled a private in field-gray, his uniform stained with mud and blood. He was enjoying sunshine and a quiet, strange lull in the firing. The heavy guns had at last been silenced; there was an eerie stillness. Suddenly a butterfly fluttered into view and alighted on the ground almost at the end of his rifle. It was a strange visitor to a battleground; so out of place; so out of keeping with rifles and mortars, barbed wire and shell holes and twisted bodies. But there it was - a gorgeous creature, swaying in the warm breeze of spring.

As the war-weary youngster watched the butterfly, he was no longer a private in field-gray. He was a boy once more, fresh & clean, swinging thru a field knee deep in clover and daisies. That strange visitor to the trench recalled for him his boynood of collecting butterflies ... of the beauty and love of life ... of days of joy and peace. It was the emblem of the eternal, a reminder that there was still peace and beauty on earth -- somewhere there was color and fragility and flowers and gardens. He forgot the enemy a few hundred yards beyond the trench; he forgot danger and privation and suffering ... he saw only new life, resurrection - the butterfly.

With all the hunger of his heart ... with the resurrection of dreams and visions of days gone by, he reached to touch the butterfly. His fingers moved ever so slowly, so cautiously, lest he frighten away this visitor of peace. But in showing this caution, he forgot another. The butterfly was just beyond his reach -- so he stretched - forgetting the watchful eye that saw him as a target. Ever so slowly he brought himself within centimeters; now he could almost touch the wings. So, he reached for the wings ... and ping, ping, ping. The sniper's bullet found its mark in his head. His stretching fingers relaxed; his hand dropped flat. For the private in field-gray, the war was over. The official bulletin read: "All is quiet on the Western front today." For the boy, the guns would never break his peace again.

LETTING GO of self-survival, this young soldier was still HOLDING ONTO THE BEAUTY OF LIFE. His cause in life was not merely doing his military duty ... not merely killing others to become a "big man in the military." Even amidst the atrocities of war, he had not lost his ultimate love for beauty, wholeness, peace and the goodness of creation. So as he died seeking that beauty, he was PRESSING TOWARD THE GOAL of God's goodness and mercy in Christ. **His country had called him to the duty of serving in war; his God had called him to the perfection of loving the beauty of life even while at war. Like Jesus Christ his Lord, he lived and he died responding faithfully to both calls.** But like Christ, his final earthly statement was to reveal the goal of loving beauty and goodness of life even amidst the horror and death of life. While LETTING GO of his life, he YET HELD ON to the greatest Way, Truth and Life given to him or anyone else: the resurrection life of Christ ... the heavenly call of God.

AMEN.

*Lent V  
First English Lutheran, Toledo  
March 17, 2002  
Peter R. Martyn, Part-time Interim*

## ***STAND UP AND COME ALIVE!***

*Thus says the Lord to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord. Ezekiel 37:5-6*

Several years ago I read about several vandals who broke into a church sanctuary and went on a damaging rampage on a Saturday night. They broke up furnishings, they ripped apart hymnals, and basically left the worship area in a mess. To add insult to injury, before leaving they spray painted the front wall with a graffiti statement: **GOD IS NOWHERE!**

When members arrived for Sunday morning worship they were devastated. Who could so tragically violate their sacred space? Who could blaspheme and denounce the presence of God? The people simply sat with their hands covering their faces. They felt doomed, dejected and depressed. They tried to glorify God in worship, but their eyes kept focusing upon the graffiti: **GOD IS NOWHERE!**

Among the congregation that day was a little girl who was just learning to read. She was still at the single-syllable stage of reading comprehension. During the service she kept struggling to figure out the words painted on the front wall. She had no idea that the expression was a hate-filled sacrilege.

Then almost triumphantly during the pastor's sermon she nudged her mom and blurted out for the whole congregation: "*Mommy, I know what it says – it says: **GOD IS NOW HERE!!***"

In her one-syllable way, she had revived and restored God's spirit of hope to that dismal congregation. In one simple expression, she had begun to transform despair into joy – she had given the people cause to rejoice again even amidst the graffiti. She proclaimed several times: **GOD IS NOW HERE!!** And through her simple proclamation, the congregation was able to STAND UP AND COME ALIVE again!

God gave Ezekiel a very similar mission around 586 BC – only the people of Israel were devastated by more than broken furniture, torn hymnals and painted graffiti. They had been torn away from their land and taken as captive-exiles in Babylonia. As a transplanted prophet, Ezekiel was with them in Babylonia and had had several visions or ecstatic experiences. One such vision was the valley of dry bones – a vision that was intended to portray Israel's life

as an exiled people. Their confrontation with Babylon had yielded death, destruction and despair. And so they commiserated this situation in vs 11: “Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off completely.” They had lost all hope for the future. They considered themselves lifeless – they felt separated from God and cut off from their beloved Israel. In short, they had become “no people.” Since God had allowed them to become so disconnected, they viewed themselves as a valley of dry, lifeless bones.

Well, God empowered Ezekiel to offer his people a new vision: one which turned the dry bones of death into vibrant new life through God’s word. For wherever God’s word is spoken there can be no separation or despair – for God’s word brings an end to hatred and violence and destruction. God’s word seeks to renew, revive, restore and give new harmony to humanity. Thus, the valley of dry bones becomes enlivened and receives God’s power of breath ... known in the O. T. as ruah, or the very power of life given by God.

So it is that when God breathes his spirit into a people ... that people is given a new purpose and reason for being. So it was for the valley of dry bones – for the dispirited people of Israel. No longer was their life to be a mess of violated and destroyed bones. God was re-creating their life to be his most precious reflection of himself. Because when God breathes his spirit into any people – he gives more than just air ... he gives his own identity ... his will to love, to forgive, to be merciful, to build up rather than to tear down. And that’s what God desires for all his people ... esp. his church – to be a reflection of this spirit – to be more than hot air, or gossip, or the trash talk of the world.

Yes, how desperately God wants his church to be more than a stiff skeleton of dry bones. He wants his church to be more than a body of brittle laws or rigid doctrines or self-serving seekers. He wants his church to manifest the vitality and energy of Jesus Christ’s spirit – where there is a real priority of the heart ... a ministry of concern for the least and the lost and the lowest and the lonely.

Is it any wonder that the Reformation occurred and needs to happen over and over and over again. Like Israel in exile – too often the church becomes lifeless forms and skeletons that are disconnected from God’s real power. Like Ezekiel, Martin Luther had to proclaim the centrality of God’s word as the real heart beat of the church’s mission. When God’s mercy and forgiveness and loving compassion are central to the church’s life – then there will be great vitality in the body.

So the question is: Where does First English find herself on this St. Patrick’s Day in the year 2002?? If she is really honest, I would guess that there have been moments when she has felt like the valley of dry bones. She has struggled to find a vital future ... she has despaired over some losses ... she has tried to seek new expressions of faithfulness ... she has had her moments of devastation since December, 2000 and before. But Ezekiel and that little girl remind her

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and everyone that no situation is beyond God's reach. God's faithfulness is to reach out and revive, restore and resurrect his body ... no matter how dry the bones have become. God proclaims that he is always here to breathe his renewed spirit into those bodies that desire his identity. As the little girl said: **GOD IS NOW HERE!**

**Yes, it's not a question of – IS GOD PRESENT! God says categorically that HE IS ALWAYS HERE ... AND WILL ALWAYS BE HERE! The question is – will we be faithful to what He stands for ... to his reason for being here?? Will we overcome the temptation to become just another valley of dry bones? Will we hold fast to God's Word and let go of all the things that so often become just idols?? Will we see that God has great hope for us every day through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ??? Even when we fall short, will we continue to believe that God still forgives us and will eagerly breathe new life and love into us again and again???? If we can say "YES" to these ... then we are faithfully connected to a living God who says: **STAND UP AND COME ALIVE!****

**AMEN.**