

TRINITY IV  
Redeemer Lutheran - Milwaukee  
July 15, 1973

Sermon by  
"WHO'S YOUR HERO?" Pastor Peter R. Martyn

"Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. . . . A disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher." (Luke 6:36, 40)

Several days ago I had a conversation with a community relations expert working on Milwaukee's east side. Part of his job description is to determine the real needs and hopes and fears of this community. A question he regularly asks is: "Who is your hero?"

He seeks to isolate one or more figures whom the community people really look up to. Who they really respect and trust. Who they would be willing to follow without reservation.

This researcher believes that a secure individual and secure community generally feel most secure when identifying with a hero figure or **competent leader**. Obviously he does not hold absolute to this position. But I think we could all agree that there is some validity to his claim.

His research results indicate that the people he's interviewed cannot identify any such hero figures. With few exceptions, the typical response is: "I really don't know."

I tried a sampling myself this past week and found people responding similarly. In fact as I questioned myself, my honest response would be the same: "I really don't know."

I Well, the obvious question then confronts us: Do we need hero figures? Maybe not in the dictionary sense of the term - that is, hero meaning daredevil. But "hero" in the sense of someone whom we look up to -- someone who commands

our respect and confidence -- someone who is a just and merciful leader -- THIS KIND OF A "HERO" WE ALL NEED. And who fills this bill??

I believe our text offers the answer. "Be merciful even as your Father is merciful." That person who manifests the merciful image of God the Father IS TRULY a person we look up to-- he is a person who commands our respect and confidence. He could be called A HERO.

The Greek meaning for mercy here is deep compassion or care because of a weak or suffering humanity. In other words MERCY here means to have compassion upon the one who has fallen short. And so to be merciful as the Father means TO HAVE COMPASSION AND TO BELIEVE IN SOMEONE EVEN UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF FAILURE.

As I look back on my life - and I'm sure as you look back on yours -- the real heroes in the biblical sense are those who have been merciful at our moments of weakness or failure. They have been our heroes BECAUSE THEY HAVE REFLECTED THE IMAGE OF GOD -- they have been our Christ-figure at that moment.

Let me just share one such moment from my life while you may recall a similar from yours. I was a freshman in college and my home parish pastor had asked me to preach for the first time. It was the Saturday night before that appointed Sunday. My sermon at that moment consisted of three sentences -- all three were the appointed biblical text.

How I wanted to just quit. My mind was furiously snatching for the right excuse. Finally I called the pastor and told him I wanted to come over to talk with him. I went - completely prepared to give up.

I don't recall the many pieces of conversation that transpired during the next two hours. But

I do recall how merciful they were. They were statements which recognized my fear RATHER than statements which judged my fear. They were words that told me MY INSECURITY was natural rather than belittling or know-it-all words. They were God's gestures -- gestures which allowed me to risk myself--even to make a fool of myself--KNOWING THAT I WOULD STILL BE ACCEPTED-- STILL BE BELIEVED IN -- STILL BE LOVED AND UNDERSTOOD.

Yes, a biblical hero is one who is merciful like our Father -- one who continues to believe in us and help us even when we fail or flutter. Do you remember anyone like that? A teacher? A friend? A family member? I sure hope so.

And so

God continues to call us to him. He does so because he knows we desperately need his mercy. He knows we need to be believed in and understood even with our failures. But he also knows that we need to reflect his image of mercy to one another. He knows that we are MORE TEMPTED to reflect judgment and condemnation THAN TO MIRROR HIS IMAGE OF MERCY. He sees this so clearly in the way we live.

This past week I talked for some time with a drug addict. She said: "Ever since my childhood I've been told that I wasn't quite good enough. I've been showered with money and things, but I haven't felt loved or accepted."

How much this person has longed and still longs to experience OUR MERCIFUL GOD through one of his disciples on earth! How sad it is that she has too often experienced petty judgments -- and now needs a DOUBLE MEASURE OF MERCY to overcome the past judgments and the present chemical addiction.

Yes, it is much easier to judge -- but what a destructive weapon it is!

The other night the Houston group was having

is regular orientation session at our house. We were working on a biblical exercise -- trying to tell one another what talents we saw in each other. One of the kids said: "This is really hard. It's easy to cut others down, but it's hard to tell them their good points."

How true it is that we find it SO MUCH MORE DIFFICULT to be merciful like our Father.

The temptation toward categorical judgment and condemnation is even more heightened today with the flood of Watergate etc. rushing at us. How I have often been tempted to get on the soapbox of self-righteousness. But one dare not climb into that judgment seat too quickly -- for God continues to call us to be merciful.

That is not to say that he expects any of us to accept or make excuses for corruption. The acts of corruption are always to be JUDGED and CONDEMNED! And we are a spineless, faithless Christian people if we do not speak out against these acts.

Those who say: "Well, that's always been going on," or "that's all part of politics" are excusing their own corrupt actions as they try to make light of others. God forgives us for sin, but he does not delight with those who perpetuate it BY MAKING EXCUSES FOR IT!

But even with the actions done and the guilty accused WHOMEVER THEY MAY BE, he calls us to be merciful even as he is merciful. He calls us into COMPASSIONATE UNDERSTANDING, with the hope that there will be repentance so that there can be forgiveness.

III Yes, as Christians we continue to look to our biblical heroes when we are tempted to judge or condemn. And above all these we look to our greatest teacher -- a man from Nazareth.

Who when faced with a sinful humanity, offered mercy in the image of his Father. As this man stood before a sinful person one day, he said, "Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more." Jesus did not minimize this prostitutes' sin, but neither did he minimize her possibilities.

He was well aware of her shameful past, but saw that her future could be different. One person has said of Christ, "In the company of sinners, he dreamed of saints."

Jesus continues to dream that dream with us here today. We come as sinners while he dreams of us as saints. We come knowing we have judged, and condemned, and failed to forgive. Yes, we have failed and fluttered *to be like our Father.*

But God continues to believe in us -- for he is a merciful God. As we come to him in repentance he offers us abundant mercy.

And then he reminds us that WE ARE HIS DISCIPLES. And in so doing, he reminds us that we ARE NOT ABOVE HIM -- for he remains our teacher. But he BELIEVES AND REMINDS US THAT WE CAN BE LIKE HIM. We can be merciful even as he is merciful.

He knows we will never be fully taught -- we will never REFLECT HIM PERFECTLY. But he's willing to accept us even in our imperfection -- because he is a merciful God. And furthermore, he promises that as we become merciful like him, we too can know the joy of being A HEROIC BIBILICAL DISCIPLE!

Let us continue to reflect this image of God and of ourselves. As individuals, as a community, as a nation, we desparately need this type of heroic leadership -- for only such leaders can truly be heroes.

*merciful*

Amen

PENTECOST IV  
Lutheran Church of the Master - Troy  
June 30, 1974

"DELIVERANCE"

"Then David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.'" Nathan answered David, 'The Lord on his part has forgiven your sin; you shall not die.'" 2 Samuel 12:13

It really takes courage to tell off the king! Usually the people around such a high authority are awed by his power and impressed with the glory that even reflects upon them. We all know how such people are tempted to tell the "boss" what he likes to hear.

But not Nathan, the court prophet. He was one of David's chief advisors - we might compare him to an assistant to the president - but he was also a man of God.

David the king, had gotten involved with a beautiful woman, Bathsheba, and to cover up his sin, he arranged to send her husband, Uriah, into battle and assigned him to the thick of fighting where he was killed. After an appropriate period of mourning, David sent for Bathsheba and she became his wife. Nathan, the court prophet sent by the Lord, confronted David by telling him a fictitious legal case in which a rich man took away the only lamb of a poor man. When the enraged David announced that the rich man should die, Nathan courageously confronted the royal murderer with his own crime. Needless to say, that took honest courage!

But it also took courage for David to respond, "I have sinned against the Lord." This was truly a mark of his greatness. Though he was a king - a great leader - he saw that he was under judgment of a higher authority. And so, instead of banishing Nathan from his presence, he acknowledged his human frailty and confessed his sin. We all know that this confession also **TOOK HONEST COURAGE!**

Need I say that the courage and honesty disclosed in this lesson for the day SEEM TO BE in short supply at all levels of our society. So much of our present day philosophy seems to be, "Anything goes, as long as you don't get caught." That is not to say that I advocate a return to the rigid authoritarianism of the good old days. Victorianism and puritan prohibition can make no claims of perfected purity. But today we seem to be derailed from the principle of honesty before God and before each other - we seem to have lost the courage to acknowledge that sin is even a reality. —

And yet, what is sin? Paul Tillich defines it cogently as - a separation between man and God, and man and man - or in an active sense, those actions which cause man to be separated from God and his intention for man. One can hardly claim that our world and its inhabitants find themselves in total comfort with God's intention. In fact, unfortunately, many people today don't really give a darn - that is highly evident by the number right now who religiously each Sunday avoid any encounter with God. We who are here are truly a minority in Troy and Birmingham-Bloomfield.

My Christian friends, I believe that this lack of encounter with God's intention for life HAS MUCH to do with THE LOW PROFILE of honesty and courage in relationships. It's very tempting to point to national authorities to illustrate the significance of today's lesson. But I don't think we need to further overstate that case. Watergate is only symptomatic of a more widespread epidemic of dishonesty.

For instance, how do you and I deal with behaviors which are obviously alien to God's intention? Are we like Nathan? Do we have the honest-courage IN LOVE to confront that other person - esp. when he/she may be an authority - when that person's lifestyle is obviously out of joint with God's intention?

I don't know about you - but I do know how difficult it OFTEN has been for me to act like Nathan in those circumstances. It's so much easier to tell the person what he wants to hear, esp. since we don't want the person to feel that we're condemning them.

And similarly - how do you and I respond when someone finally does encounter us like Nathan? Is our response like that of David's - or do we get defensive and walk out of the whole scene?

Who are the "king-David's" of our lives? For many of us, our relationship to our spouses calls for a Nathan-David tie. For children, king-David is often represented by the parents. As employees, our king-Davids are cast as our superiors. The text before us today is simply prodding us to evaluate the level of our honesty and courage in these relationships when the relationship is tainted by sin.

Do we just excuse it - or like Nathan and David, do we constructively deal with it? Like Nathan, do we have the courage to confront? Like David, do we have the courage to confess? Like Nathan, do we have the integrity to forgive after we have confronted? Like David, do we have the integrity to repent after we have been confronted? Like Nathan, can we accept the other person's failure without losing respect for that person? Like David, can we still love and respect the person who confronts us?

While in Milwaukee, two of my closest friends became involved in flagrant immoral activity -- in actions that were alien to God's intention for them. I lived for a year trying to rise to the occasion of being a Nathan. So often I was so close - and yet fearful that any words would be interpreted as a condemnation of them rather than of their actions.



Finally, one day I sat down with one of these persons and had the courage to share a struggle that I was facing at that time. Although it wasn't a fictitious struggle like Nathan's, it was a parable - it was a story which finally allowed a friend to expose his life to me without the fear of condemnation. In theology, we call that moment, the stroke of grace -- the moment that God's love vividly beats through the pulse of a relationship.

As Christians, we are committed to those pulse beats in our relationships - because our experience has NOT been one of condemnation, but one of forgiveness.

Only when a person is confident of forgiveness CAN HE COURAGEOUSLY REPENT AND BE HONEST. Similarly - when you and I are confident that we can forgive, then we are called to be courageous in confronting any person whose lifestyle has become disjointed from God's intention.

David said "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan answered: The Lord on his part has forgiven your sin; you shall not die."

That's true DELIVERANCE! That's what we all yearn for in life - we all desire to be delivered from the suffocation of guilt -- from the hopelessness of separation.

As Christians we are in the tradition of Nathan and David. That tradition enables us to be courageous and honest in our relationships with God and with one another -- because the Christian tradition proclaims the confidence of forgiveness.

The lesson today reminds us that it's hard for any leader to courageously repent and confess IF HE FEARS CONDEMNATION. We know how this text applies to our lives - none of us will have the courage to repent as long as our society puts a premium on condemnation.

But we are a mini-society who have experienced the power of deliverance. God calls us to penetrate the fabric of society with our power of deliverance. He calls us to do so with courage and honesty - because we KNOW that we can be honest and courageous when we live with the confidence of forgiveness.

Let us deliver one another and our king-Davids, wherever they may be, from the destructiveness of a lifestyle which is alien to God's intention for humanity.

Amen.

PENTECOST IV  
Luth Church of the Master, Troy  
July 1, 1979 (Final sermon at the Master)

"So we are always of good courage; we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the (exalted) Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight." II Cor. 5:6

On Tuesday - at a farewell luncheon with other pastors, I was asked if I would have done anything different as I look over my ministry here. Among other things that I suggested - I stated that I did not feel I had taken God's gift of faith seriously enough. You can just imagine how much other clergy expected to hear that from me. It was as if they didn't expect me to say anything negative - especially in the area of faith.

But the facts are that too often I have taken the gift of faith for granted. And when I talk about the gift of faith - I'm talking about God's promises to those who believe. There is nothing greater than this gift; but what does it mean to you and to me???

Well for many of us - it becomes such a <sup>individual</sup> ~~personal~~ thing -- that we are unwilling to share it with those who need it the most. And that was the issue I was trying to get at with the other pastors.

There are literally hundreds of people moving into this area every month. But so often I have been content to let them move in WITHOUT INVITING THEM TO RECEIVE THE PROMISES OF GOD. That means - I've often been too caught up in my own little world of pastoring TO GET OUT INTO THE HIWAYS AND BIWAYS with the gift of faith. And ultimately - that could mean that a lot of people in this area are destined to go to hell -- because I have not taken seriously enough SHARING THE GIFT OF FAITH with these new residents.

And you know what the pastors response to this who inquiry was -- they told me I was being too hard on myself. They followed that by making up excuses for themselves -- trying to rationalize

their own lack of response to this growing community.

But give these same guys an opportunity to talk about how bad things are in their parish -- they can go on for hours about the lack of Christian commitment in our society. They can come up with hundreds of stories of the difficulties facing them in their struggling congregations.

Yes - the facts for pastors and lay members are not much different. We'd much rather get together to cry about our problems over a coffee clutch -- than we are to hit the highways of life with the promises of God.

But that was not the case for St. Paul. In this lesson to the Corinthians - he earlier talks about the many hardships and persecutions ~~that~~ were constantly threatening his discipleship. And more than that - Paul was not a strong man -- we are told he was a man of frail health suffering from an incurable illness which he called "his thorn in the flesh."

But the promises of God through Jesus Christ were so powerful for him - that no hardship could prevent him from spreading the gospel. Yes - through the gift of faith - Paul was always of good courage. No evangelist in the Christian tradition made more clear that courage is the by-product of faith -- not faith of courage.

Christians, says Paul, face the future with courage and confidence - NOT BECAUSE THEY KNOW THAT EVERYTHING IS GOING TO TURN OUT OK -- but because they have faith in the promises of God.

Dear friends - that is the gospel! Living with confidence because of God's promises. Being willing to take chances because God's promises are always ours to keep! No greater gift can man possess than the promises of God - eternal forgiveness and the guarantee of an everlasting relationship!

And that's why Paul says we can always be of good courage!! Our courage is not based upon our past failures or accomplishments -- our courage is not based on our good deeds -- our courage is not based upon any one person!! Our courage is based upon our REVERENT BELIEF IN God's Word -- our dependence upon his promises!! We believe with utter confidence THAT HE HAS PUT HIS SPIRIT WITHIN US! And because we seek to trust in his power within us -- we can always be of good courage!!

You want some proof of the pudding? Well, you need only look at some of your own stories of faith. Why is it that Lutheran Church of the Master is sponsoring a Vietnamese family now -- and was hands down on it 4 years ago?? It's not because of money - and don't let anybody give you that bunch! It's because of faith!

It's because we have received a few people who are so deeply grateful for God's promises -- that they must share that gratitude with those who are suffering. The courage for this refugee commitment has not come from money!! If money were the motivator - the church wouldn't do a darned thing! The courage for this commitment came from the faith of a few -- and faith is far more contagious than anything is this world.

And today - I personally commend the Master's people for their courage in this decision. Because this ministry to the refugee family is going to keep Christ's mission in front of people during the pastoral vacancy. Instead of feeling sorry for yourselves -- you will concentrate on what God has called you to do -- TO REACH OUT with his promises to the hungry, the homeless, and the hopeless!

This is just one example of your courage that has come from faith. I could name others, like the Master's Twelve. But you have seen clearly the results of that faithful effort -- people who have responded to your invitation to the gospel.

There's <sup>another</sup> ~~one~~ example of courageous witness deserving brief further comment. As we were constructing the newsletter this past week - I over heard a couple of people express feelings of apprehension over a by-line in the newsletter. They were afraid to have their names with articles for fear that people would say -- "Oh, no - not that person again."

Well let's get over that problem right now. A Christian never need apologize for his/her witness on behalf of Christ. If the other people in the church don't like it -- then they better get off their duffs and start making their faith public!!

Yes - thanks be to God for those who take the faith seriously enough TO MAKE A PERSONAL WITNESS. You can be assured that I have felt personally blessed by those of you who have made public testimony of your faith. But - the facts are - that too often you and I don't take God's challenge of faith seriously enough. We'd much rather sway with the winds of popularity than be grounded to the rock of faith. And so as a church - as pastors - as dedicated believers, we've got to become more like the Russian peasant who stood alone in his deserted village against Napoleon.

He was a peasant woodsman - who carried his ax in his leather belt. When Napoleon's captain spotted him - he ordered the man be shot immediately. The soldiers fell in -- leveled their guns - but the man sat motionless - fearlessly down the barrells of the guns. Upon seeing this the captain ordered them to lower thier rifles.

He walked to the peasant and said: "I will spare your life ... but not without putting a mark of Napoleon on you. He ordered the branding iron to be heated red hot. Then he ordered the peasant's hand be branded. As the man's hand was burning and quivering - he noted that the letter "N" had been branded in

his palm. He asked - "What is this??"

The captain replied: It is the letter "N" and it stands for Napoleon. You belong to Napoleon now!

The poor old man sat motionless for a moment. His pain was intense. Then an idea occurred to him. While the French soldiers laughed and jeered at him -- he placed his hand on a large solid log. Then his right hand removed his ax from his belt - and with one solid swoop he severed his own hand. "There, he said to the captain - "my hand may belong to Napoleon, but I am yet a Russian. And if I must die - I will die a Russian."

It was faith that brought that peasant to his act of self-sacrifice. In his case -- faith in his country. *He looks up to God for those who show that faith in their God.*

As I leave this fold today - it is my hope that at times you have seen a sacrificial courage in my ministry that is based upon faith in God's promises. I know for a fact that I have seen that same sacrificial courage from you because of your faith in Christ.

But these are all manifestations of the past. What's important is the story of the Master's future -- the story of how her faith in God's promises enabled her to be much more courageous than she has shown in these 15 years. So come-- be filled with his power and promise -- so that the next 15 years will **ALWAYS BE OF GOOD COURAGE** -- the courage that expresses itself in the self-sacrificing love of Jesus Christ.

AMEN

PENTECOST IV  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
July 2 & 5, 1987  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

**"REAP WHAT YOU SOW!"**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harrassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'

Matthew 9:36-37

There's an old tale from India that has probably been told in many ways, but I most recently read the tale as a story of a good king who ruled wisely and well. He was loved by the people of his kingdom. One day the king called his four daughters and told them that he was going to leave on a long journey. He wanted to experience a greater closeness to God ... so he was going to take a prayer pilgrimage. In his absence, he was giving his daughters responsibility for the oversight of his kingdom.

They protested, saying "we will never be able to rule over your kingdom without you." But he assured them that they would do well in his absence. He said, "It is my prayer that this gift will help you learn the true meaning of power and authority." With that he placed a single grain of rice in each daughter's palm, and left.

The oldest daughter immediately went to her room and tied a long golden thread around the grain of rice placing it in her crystal box. And every day she admired it. The second daughter also went to her room, where she placed the grain of rice in a wooden box and hid it securely under her bed. The third daughter, being very pragmatic, looked at the grain and thought, "This grain of rice is no different from millions of others." So she threw it away.

The youngest daughter took the grain to her room and reflected a long time about the significance of the gift. Weeks and months passed before she really understood the true meaning of the gift.

Months became years, and the four daughters did their best to be responsible for their father's kingdom. Then one day, he returned. Greeting his daughters with loving warmth and a long beard, he immediately asked to see the gifts that he had given them.

The oldest daughter rushed to her room and brought the crystal box: "Father, I carefully tied a golden thread around the grain and kept it secure all this time." Bowing to his daughter, the king accepted the box and said, "Thank you."



Next, the second daughter presented her father with the wooden box and grain of rice, saying: "All these years I have kept the grain of rice secure under my bed." Again the father bowed, accepted her box and said, "Thank you." The third daughter rushed to the kitchen, grabbed a grain of rice, and ran back saying, "Father, here is a grain of rice." Again, the father smiled, accepted the grain, bowed and said: "Thank you."

Finally, the youngest daughter stepped before her father and spoke: "Father, I do not have the grain of rice that you gave me." "Whatever did you do with it?" the king inquired.

"Father, I thought about that grain of rice for nearly a year before I discovered the meaning of your gift. I finally realized that the grain was a seed, so I planted it in the ground. Soon it grew, and from it I harvested millions of seeds, and then I planted them, and again another crop was harvested. Come, and look at the results."

The king followed his daughter to the window where he looked upon an enormous crop of rice stretching as far as the eye could see. There was enough rice harvested to feed his entire nation. Stepping to this daughter, he placed the golden crown on her head and said: "Only you have learned the meaning of power and authority. It is yours."

A simple story - but a story that beautifully illustrates the meaning of life and of the text before us today. In birth and baptism, God gives us his greatest grain of life - his eternal love and forgiveness. For many Christians, that gift becomes only a treasure to hoard for themselves. They cling to that gift and bury it in a baptismal box in their bedroom. That great gift from God simply lies dormant. Instead of a seed to transform the world, it remains a meaningless ceremonial certificate stuffed in a box of nostalgic notions. That grain of great potential serves no real purpose -- it simply sits parked for a lifetime.

Living that way reminds me of the large family that traveled to New York City for the first time in an old car without air conditioning on a hot, muggy summer day. Upon reaching the heart of the Apple, they began to search for a parking spot ... driving around and around and around, but having no success. After endless sweating and swearing and near suffocating, at last they spied a car pulling out of a spot. The father accelerated into the precious space and sighed with deep relief. Then he turned to all of them and asked, "Well, now that we've finally parked, does anyone remember why we came?"

Well, now that we've parked ourselves in the sanctuary,

does anyone remember why we came? Isn't it true, that sometimes we seemingly spend our lives merely looking for parking places ... making life a matter of finding a place to park rather than a place to serve. What a meaningless maze when life's meaning is merely securing a momentary parking place!! What a putrid purpose when worship is little more than parking in a pew for a little more than an hour. What an exploitive existence when the whole reason for being is merely to jockey someone else out of a parking spot for a couple of decades. Is that the sum total of life's story??

One author has said, "A Christian life, like any good story, needs a good beginning, a different middle, and an even better ending to have full shape." Too many people never get beyond a good beginning.

Of the four daughters in our earlier story, three never got beyond a good beginning. They did not transform the gift of grain into anything new and better. Their grains did not support any life ... not even their own. Their beginning, middle and end were all the same -- the same grain of rice! But the fourth daughter took an ordinary grain of rice and transformed it into an extraordinary harvest to feed the whole world. The middle and end of her story were far different and far better than the beginning. She did more than find a parking place for her grain of rice.

That's exactly God's purpose for your life and mine: TO TRANSFORM THE WORLD WITH THE GIFT OF HIS LOVE AND MERCY. And how do we do this? By becoming disciples who plant the seeds of his love and harvest its fruit for the harrassed and helpless sheep of the world. Christ has given us -- the church -- the power and authority to do the works of his kingdom. We are to sow his forgiving love and benevolent grace in this world. And that kind of labor will always be purposeful and fulfilling to this world.

Each Sunday we come together to celebrate the gift of grain that God has given us. He calls us together in this place and says, "What have you done with my seed this week?" Have you planted it for others? Have you harvested it for the helpless and the needy? Have you offered its fruits to the harrassed and homeless? Have you been harvesting what you first received? Or is your seed sitting in some crystal box under your bed ... just rotting away with other ceremonial certificates?

This simple piece of bread and this little cup of wine reflect the same symbolism as the grain of rice in our earlier story: THEY REPRESENT VERY ORDINARY GIFTS THAT HAVE THE POTENTIAL OF BECOMING EXTRAORDINARY LIFE-GIVING POWERS. This is still ordinary bread ... and this is still ordinary wine. But once God plants it into our bodies with his forgiving word, then it has the potential to become

extraordinary forgiveness with whom it is shared. In fact, this simple little wafer can turn the heart of a man or woman into becoming the giver of millions of loaves for the hungry. And this little thimble of wine can become the energizing force of liberty and justice for many oppressed people in this country and community. This ordinary bread and this ordinary wine CAN HAVE SUPERNATURAL POWER IF WHEN WE TAKE THEM WE PLANT THEM RATHER THAN PUTTING THEM INTO A BOX UNDER OUR BEDS.

Yes, the fireworks display for this 150th birthday of Toledo will never work the miracles of this bread and wine as far as liberty and justice is concerned. July 4th, Independence Day, is in reality another moment in which God came into this world to offer a grain of rice to his people. And in this case he said to his American people, take this grain of rice and see if you can learn the true meaning of power and authority. See if you can multiply this grain so that all mankind will experience liberty and justice for all. See if you can Declare Independence for yourselves but still be willing to serve those who are less fortunate and more feeble ... those who are harrassed and helpless. See if you can become the millions of laborers needed to plant and harvest a vineyard of liberty and justice so that the whole world will bow down and worship me, the author of all freedom and equality.

Yes, this 4th of July we need to celebrate the joys of 150 years of community life in Toledo. But let us not assume that our \$60,000 fireworks display means that we have fulfilled our task as laborers in the vineyard. The cries of the harrassed and helpless cannot be stifled in this community or country by the booms and bangs and oohs and aahs of a fireworks display. There are still many sheep in this land without a shepherd. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." We don't even have to go out into the community to realize how true this is -- it's sometimes impossible to even get Christians in this congregation to serve each other as teachers, as healers, as practitioners of God's love and forgiveness.

God challenges us to turn this Civil Holiday into a Sacred Celebration ... to make an ordinary Declaration of Independence into his Extraordinary Kingdom of Liberty and Justice for all. We've been attempting that harvest in this country for 211 years now ... and in this city for 150 years. But we haven't finished the job. Injustice, oppression, human indignity, idolatry, immorality, and many other demonic forms are still causing suffering among God's people. There's never been a greater season for healing and helping disciples of Jesus Christ.

So like those ordinary twelve of 2000 years ago, let us

become God's extraordinary laborers in this 20th century. Let us make certain that our story has more than a good beginning -- let us transform God's good beginning into an ending which reflects his kingdom on earth. Let us not merely reap God's gifts of grace without planting them for future generations, especially for the harrassed and helpless among us! Let us pray that the Lord will send us as his laborers into his harvest! AMEN.

PENTECOST IV  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
July 2 & 5, 1992  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"OUR DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE"  
LET GO & LET GOD!"

"Therefore I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little. Luke 7:47

An ancient Rabbi once wrote: "We are born with our fists clenched ... and we die with our hands wide open." There's a profound message in that simple sentence: it takes most of us an entire lifetime to learn that we were born to "let go." Life is given to us in order that we might give it away -- we are to make an offering to others as we have received from the bounty of God. There are many ways of saying it -- but it all boils down to learning to live with our hands WIDE OPEN instead of clenched SHUT.

But we aren't taught that lesson very well. In fact from early childhood, the message is quite different. We are taught to "hang on" not to "let go." First, it's a bottle, then it's holding onto daddy's hand, then it's holding onto a spoon and fork, and then it becomes holding onto toys and bigger toys and then houses and property and investments and status and professional rank, etc.

Is it any wonder that our early training soon leads our children to say, "It's mine, and you can't have it!" "I got it first, and I'm keeping it!" "Don't you dare touch it - it's all mine!" We teach to clutch, to close, to clammer, to control, to contain, to take, to basically grab life and keep it all to yourself! "Take all you can get with gusto, 'cause you only go round once in life!" The goal of life becomes obtaining, possessing, claiming, capturing, and forever retaining. "Hold on, but never let go!"

And so grade school years come along and we find our kids puffing themselves up by belittling their classmates with such classics as: "I've got more than you do! HaHaHa Ha Ha!" The measure of life ... of human worth becomes a matter of "holding onto" more than the next guy!

When this clutching, possessing, holding onto goes to an extreme, it sees a father giving his daughter a new baseball and bat. And instead of playing ball, she hangs them on her bedroom wall - admiring & fondling her possessions rather than using them to relate to other girls/boys. How sad when a daughter clutches onto her bat and ball -- for she has chosen to play alone -- possibly to play alone forever. For only as a girl or boy turn the ball loose and share the bat with others can they ever develop their skills and form meaningful relationships. But many times we clutch everything; is it any wonder we often end up playing the game all alone in life?

As important as it is for us to develop our ego strengths and unique identities, too often our society teaches only the importance of clenching our fists. We too often teach possessiveness - "my" town, "my" nation, "my" friend, "my" church, "my" stuff. We put so much emphasis upon individualism and control that there is no room for unity & cooperation. Then it becomes "my way, or no way at all." And we wonder why we have such rifts between rich and poor, white and black, clergy and laity, parent and child. Our obsession with "holding onto" ultimately leads us to believe that we can control everything -- even life itself.

But life has a different lesson. We cannot clench our fists forever. We lose things - our jobs, our loved ones, our health, our wealth, and even life itself. Holding on with clenched fists is ultimately a losing battle. There comes a time of surrender -- as a father, it means a time of letting go of daughters, it means losing my physique, it means realizing there will be a better pastor for Hope, it means finally giving up this life for eternal life. There comes a time when we can no longer say it's all mine. There comes a time when we must "let go ... and let God!"

What is really tragic, dear friends, is that some people never reach this stage until they are lying on their death beds. Some scratch and claw and grab and clench for a whole lifetime. There is never a vision in life beyond the self for these -- never do they see beyond their own ego, arrogance, control or accumulations. Life is lived totally for self-preservation! And then reality finally hits after the first massive stroke or heart attack! The message at last comes home - life cannot be grabbed forever!

Thank God for the stories of people who finally learned to "let go" - to trust in God's love and forgiveness as life's ultimate power. Today's gospel story is a graphic case in point. We meet a woman who possessed a precious ointment. She probably acquired it from sleeping around with many men. She was a common prostitute and despised by the Jewish elite. But she had learned what you and I have been taught so well - she had learned to grab life with gusto - to literally take all she could get! She clutched all she could have! Although her method was immoral, her mentality was not much different from the wealthist of Jewish society ... or from you or me today. But she at least knew she was losing. She was not a happy camper - holding onto guilt, greed, grossness had made her a wretch!

Now she encountered Jesus of Nazareth. And for the first time, she LET GO ... she turned loose her guilt, her precious oil, her rebellion, her greed. In the presence of this man's accepting love, she could finally LET GO because she experienced grace instead of rejection. The love given her by Jesus Christ was OPEN-HANDED ACCEPTANCE RATHER THAN CLENCHED FIST REJECTION - rather than stern, finger-pointing controlling love! She could NOW love much, because she had been forgiven so much!! (quote passage).

What does that say for all of us on this July 4th weekend -- this time in which we CELEBRATE THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE. Have we really DECLARED OURSELVES independent of those powers and principalities that imprison, enslave and destroy the goodness of life? We know we haven't! Why have we become so DEPENDENT upon those powers & ways that hurt, and harass, and hassle, and harm, and harbor hatred? Why is it that we delight in these powers? Why do we relish ridiculing minorities? We do we belittle other religions? Why do we yell hateful slogans at those who see issues differently? Why are we so negative; so difficult to get along with. Why have we allowed these powers of guilt/greed to rule our churches, our communities, our country when we know that the wages of such sinfulness is death?? Today, let's make a declaration of independence that really counts -- let's get into the power of the gospel BY LETTING GO OF HATRED & HOPELESSNESS & HAUGHTINESS!

Are you or am I hanging onto some senseless grudge between a friend or working associate or maybe even fellow member here at Hope? The gospel of Jesus Christ DECLARES US TO LET GO OF SUCH STUPID POWERS OF DEATH AND DAMNATION. Let go and let God take control right now! Make this weekend's celebration one with real fireworks and real flag-waving -- let us declare ourselves independent of every power and principality that causes pain, persecution, perversity or possessiveness toward other human beings. Let us LET GO of such polluted living and LET GOD renew our lives with his peace, patience, gentleness, mercy and self-control!

Yes - this is what Christ has taught us to do: TO LET GO of whatever is ailing us ... whatever is causing us grief ... whatever has us stuck in guilt. Yes - this is what Christ has shown us: to forgive as we have been forgiven ... just as he forgave the prostitute and redeemed her into a proclaimer of his forgiving love. Yes - this is what Christ has demonstrated to us: not to clutch and clammer after one's own life, but to lay down your life for your friends. Is it any wonder that he died with his heart and his hands open to a needy world ... for out of those open hands nailed to the cross CAME THE ASSURANCE THAT YOU AND I ARE BOUND TO GOD'S GRACE FOREVER! Nothing in all creation will ever separate us from that love!

Jesus Christ LET GO of his life, in order that we might HANG ONTO God's love forever! Is it any wonder that he gathers us around his table TO AGAIN MAKE HIS DECLARATION! There is no greater DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE than the one given to us every time we eat and drink at this table: YOU ARE FREE & FORGIVEN!! NOW, NEVER LET GO OF THAT FREEDOM AND FORGIVING FAITH!!

AMEN.

What does that say for all of us on this July 4th weekend -- this time in which we CELEBRATE THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE. Have we really DECLARED OURSELVES independent of those powers and principalities that imprison, enslave and destroy the goodness of life? We know we haven't! Why have we become so DEPENDENT upon those powers & ways that hurt, and harass, and hassle, and harm, and harbor hatred? Why is it that we delight in these powers? Why do we relish ridiculing minorities? We do we belittle other religions? Why do we yell hateful slogans at those who see issues differently? Why are we so negative; so difficult to get along with. Why have we allowed these powers of guilt/greed to rule our churches, our communities, our country when we know that the wages of such sinfulness is death?? Today, let's make a declaration of independence that really counts -- let's get into the power of the gospel BY LETTING GO OF HATRED & HOPELESSNESS & HAUGHTINESS!

Are you or am I hanging onto some senseless grudge between a friend or working associate or maybe even fellow member here at Hope? The gospel of Jesus Christ DECLARES US TO LET GO OF SUCH STUPID POWERS OF DEATH AND DAMNATION. Let go and let God take control right now! Make this weekend's celebration one with real fireworks and real flag-waving -- let us declare ourselves independent of every power and principality that causes pain, persecution, perversity or possessiveness toward other human beings. Let us LET GO of such polluted living and LET GOD renew our lives with his peace, mercy and self-control!

No better story illustrates this reality that one I told several years ago about a patient who was in wretched condition -- not because of physical pain, but because of anger, contempt, and self-pity. Finally, one night, when he was at his lowest, he told the nurse: "Just give me something to end it all!"

Much to the man's surprise, she said: "All right, I will. She went to the nightstand, came back with his bible, and began reading: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him might not perish but have everlasting life." Then she said: "There, if you will believe that - it will end it all -- it will end your self-hatred and self-pity and destructive bitterness. God really loves you and forgives you. You can stop hating yourself and everyone else right now -- you can start letting go of everything that is destroying you and all your relationships right now!" For the first time in a long time -- that night that man LET GO OF CONTROL ... he began to start loving and trusting God and forgetting about his bad prognosis and limited future days on earth!

So - what has Christ taught US TO DO? To hang onto our sins - or to let go of whatever is ailing us, whatever causes us grief, whatever causes us guilt? What has Christ shown us?? To punish, reject, and ridicule those who have



sinned -- or to forgive them as we have been forgiven! What has Christ demonstrated to us? Did he die clutching onto his life - or did he die with his heart and his hands open to the world? Out of his open hands nailed to the cross came the assurance that you and I are bound to God's grace now and forever.

Jesus Christ LET GO of his life, in order that we might HOLD ONTO God's love forever! Is it any wonder that he gathers us around his table TO AGAIN MAKE HIS DECLARATION. There is no greater DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE than the one given to us every time we eat and drink at this table: YOU ARE FREE & FORGIVEN! NOW, NEVER LET GO OF THAT FREEDOM AND FORGIVING FAITH!

AMEN

PENTECOST IV  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
June 19, 1994  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## LITTLE THINGS MEAN A LOT!

"With what can we compare the kingdom of God? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade." Mark 4:30-32

Sometimes the things we do, the things we say, the commitments we make, the concern we show - all these sometimes seem very insignificant ... and I esp. feel that way about Sun. sermons. In a world which is so big where global communication takes but an instant - of what value is a 15-minute sermon? Our world tells us that big is better, and that bigger is better yet. Big business. Big deals. Big government. Big issues. Big numbers. Big bombs. Big important people. Even big churches. These are the things that really count. There's no value in being small. And all this reinforces our insignificance.

Almost everyone here at one time or another has felt like a "nobody!" And yet everyone in this room wants to be a "Somebody!" We all want to count! We all want to be recognized, to be appreciated, to be seen in the light and have our day in the sun. There's a great story of an Iowan farmer who turned a big Texan somebody into an Iowan nobody.

The Texan was visiting this small Iowa farmer and said: "My Gosh, is this all the land you got?? Where I come from, I can get in my car at 6:00 a.m. and drive all day and never see the end of my land." "Is that right," said the Iowa farmer. "I used to have a car just like that."

Too much of the world suffers from a Texan "marketing mentality." Bigness may be good for sales and marketing experts; bigness may be valuable for stockholders and other profit seekers. But Jesus Christ had a way of totally inverting the value system of the world.

He said: "The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It begins as the smallest seed, then grows and becomes the largest of all plants." Jesus emphasis here is upon the small acts of faith that have a large impact upon life. In essence, Jesus is saying: LITTLE THINGS MEAN A LOT.

Little words like "follow me" and "forgive, as you have been forgiven." Little deeds like "giving a cup of water," "welcoming a stranger," or "crying with one who is mourning." Little things like five loaves and two fishes,

a widow's mite, a splash of baptismal water for "Braden," a mustard seed. Little words, little deeds, little things - these were so often the total focus of Jesus' ministry.

We may have difficulty affirming this reality because our eyes have been trained to look only for big stuff in life: Big buildings, big cars, big churches, big names, big deals. Esp. on this father's day - we dads need to be cautioned about our obsession with bigness; that is even more dramatic after the events of O.J. during this week. We have seen that even big heroes can fall; they too are sinful, jealous & irrational. God doesn't work merely with big deals. He works more often in what the world calls "insignificant," the unimpressive, the "nobody" strata of life. Who would have thought that God was at work in a baby born to a peasant couple in a stable in Bethlehem? Who would have thought that God was at work in a crucifixion of a common criminal on a garbage heap outside Jerusalem? Who would have thought that God could be at work through tap water for infants like Braden at a baptismal font? Who would have thought that God can work through common bread and wine? But here is where he works best -- in the common, everyday realities of life. In the things that are called "nothing" or nobodies. God's Word always directs us from the skyscrapers to the little common places where he has and always will be present.

Little words like "I love you," "I forgive you," "I need you," "I care about you." Little deeds like a morning kiss, a daily smile, a phone call, an evening hug, a greeting card, or just taking the time to talk or eat together. This past week, I was talking with a widow ... and she reinforced the truth of how it's the little things that she misses most in the loss of her husband: the snoring at night, the laughter in the family room, the little side glances of appreciation or disgust. It's the little things that we often take for granted ... until they are no longer present. Then we wish we had them ... or didn't crab so much when we did have them.

One of my greatest temptations and sins - and I'm afraid many fathers suffer just like me - is that I often define God's character by the marketplace of the world: BIGNESS! Why is it that we are so enamored by Glass Cathedrals, by huge Crusades, by Easter attendances, by Christmas pageantry? Why do we think that's where God will be?? Why is it that I am often frustrated when people don't commit to God as they commit to other things? Why is it that I often judge people's faith by the visible standards of the world when true faith is invisible? Why is it that we make "bigness" the essence of faith rather than consistency, regularity, & fidelity? God says: THE KINGDOM OF GOD MAY BE COMPARED TO A MUSTARD SEED. That's not bigness. Rather it's a small seed, which when given proper nurture, always makes the big difference!

Little deeds, little things so often make the big

difference. During the 4th century, a Christian hermit named Telemachus came to Rome during the gladiatorial games. Telemachus was a little man, a nobody. He attended the games and was horrified to behold 80,000 people cheering as human beings fought and killed each other for sport.

He leaped into the arena and stood between two human gladiators. Knocked down by them, he got up again and stood his ground. Stones flew from the crowd along with curses. But Telemachus stood his ground. Finally, the Prefect of the games gave the order. A sword flashed, and Telemachus fell dead to the ground.

There was a hush in the crowd. 80,000 people realized that he had given his life for two men he didn't even know -- whom he had never met before. 80,000 people became aware of their brutality, their guilt, their sin. Never again were the gladiatorial games held in Rome. How much we need a Telemachus today in a world so ready to use guns/knives to settle disputes & jealousies - a world which makes a media circus out of the tragedy of fear & murder. One little man, a nobody named Telemachus - did what Jesus Christ had done a few hundred years earlier: he offered his life as an act of salvation for 80,000 people. A mustard seed man became a global giant. A nobody became a somebody.

This past week, Ryne Sandburg of the Chicago Cubs gave up a 7 million contract. In one sense that was a great act of integrity, faith & sacrifice (no small peanuts). He deserves commendation for it. But the media pays so much attention to the Ryne Sandbergs and O. J. Simpsons ... that we can easily forget about those right around us - the one's we might be tempted to call "nobodies" who are the real "somebodies" of our lives. Like the 50 teachers and helpers at VBS this past week who came out in dreadful heat just to share the love of Jesus with 125 kids. These are the mustard seeds that have made a real difference for our children; they're not the so-called heroes of the media - we won't stay up two-hours watching them be chased on Toledo freeways, but they are the ones that have made a big difference to our children.

God calls upon us to be this kind of mustard seed - to plant this kind of love in the world. We are the planters of His seed of love. Notice -- he doesn't demand that we bring in the finished product. He merely asks us to do the planting; he will see to the finished product. How much I need to hear this message as a parish pastor!

What better news could there be for us?? Is it any wonder we call it THE GOOD NEWS? God does not make us responsible for saving anyone! He will take care of that. The burden of salvation is not ours - not dependent upon our good deeds or religious acts. That's why Jesus very vividly describes us as mustard seeds. Seeds cannot be

forced to grow. We can't pull out the finished plant from the seed. The seed has its own growth cycle -- it is beyond our control. Only God can assure the full growth.

God calls us to merely cooperate in the growth cycle of faith. We can plant, we can nourish, we can fertilize. But we can't force the finished product. God calls for little acts of love from each of us -- he will take care of the big acts of love like resurrection and eternity. He will take care of the final harvest.

So, in the meantime, God calls us NOT TO BE OBSESSED WITH BIGNESS IN THIS WORLD. Rather, we are called to offer the little words, the little deeds, the LITTLE THINGS THAT MEAN A LOT. These LITTLE THINGS have the greatest significance for life and in life. These are the things that you & I remember when we look back over time. LET US BE ABOUT "THE LITTLE THINGS THAT MEAN A LOT!"

AMEN.

*Pentecost IV*  
*First English Lutheran Church, Toledo*  
*July 1, 2001*  
*Peter R. Martyn, Part-time Interim*

## ***“First And Foremost!”***

*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ... And as they were going along the road, someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ And Jesus said, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’ To another he said, ‘Follow me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’ Another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’ Luke 7:51;57-62*

Over my thirty years of pastoral ministry, I have loved pre-marital counseling. It’s one of the most significant ways to stay in touch with the values and aspirations of young adults. And in some cases, it affords a relationship that may be cherished for a whole lifetime. But there are also pre-marital situations where I have had some perplexing concerns & questions – especially about the motives of some couples in choosing a church wedding.

During my typical first two pre-marital sessions – I usually focus upon general wedding planning as well as the joys & anxieties that are being felt by the couple. Finally, at the third session we get down to the reality of faith and the church: “Why get married as a Christian? Why get married in God’s holy place – a church building? During that session – especially when the couple has no ties to the church – I will usually ask: *How do you view your spiritual life together?? How is the church and its message important to you?? How will you share your faith with your family – esp. your children?*” Several years ago, I asked a bride & groom – **HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR FAITH?** The bride answered, “I guess I would call myself ‘sort-of-a-Christian’ ... you know, like many others – I’m sort-of-a-Christian!”

I’m wondering – is that the way you would describe your faith? Are you just “sort-of-a-Christian?” Is that the kind of passion you attach to your faith? Is that what it means to follow Jesus Christ – to be “sort-of-a-Christian?” Imagine your confidence if your doctor said he was “sort-of-a-doctor;” or your lawyer said she was “sort-of-a-lawyer;” or the mayor said he was “sort-of-a mayor”?!? Is that the best we can do after 40 or 50 or 60 years of faithfulness – “I’m sort-of-a-Christian.” Well, the statement of that bride was a real give-away to me; it indicated that EVERYTHING ELSE was of first importance in that bride’s life. The kingdom of God was not ruling ... was not in charge or did not give purpose to her daily living.

In today’s gospel Jesus has a real conflict with “sort-of-Christians” – with disciples who put everything else first, and the work of the kingdom last. In this gospel Jesus addresses would-be followers with a simple but total commission: “First and foremost, Follow Me!” And the response he often gets to this clear

and comprehensive commission is: O.K. BUT FIRST, I must accumulate enough for myself! BUT FIRST, I must satisfy the demands of my family! BUT FIRST, I must finish this business deal! BUT FIRST, I must put everything else in my life in order! How many times has Jesus said to First English, *First and Foremost, Follow Me!* ... but other priorities/ issues have been more important than HIS MISSION for this congregation?? Is that why God is using the Urban Ministry Team to ask First English: Do you really want to become a different expression of following Christ into the future?

Let's face it – taking care of building concerns or family matters or funeral details are all important realities for Jesus' followers. But what then caused Jesus to be so harsh when he heard these responses from would-be followers? Quite simply – at this point in the gospel he was no longer on a ho-hum round-up of followers. He had “set his face to go to Jerusalem” – that meant he was headed for the ultimate finish-line of his earthly mission: he was seeking to redeem humanity from all her chaos and bigotry. When that's the goal of one's mission – there's no longer time for secondary things like family reunions or burial customs or institutional agendas. When you're on your way to your own termination – then you aren't thinking about burial practices or family frolicking or other secondary matters of the good & easy life.

Obviously, Jesus is not saying that secondary matters of life are bad. There must be a time to bury the dead. Likewise, for family reunions. There must be a time to remember the good ole days in congregational life. But there's also a time for a single-minded focus on God's mission. And the question of that focus needs to be in front of us every day: How can we make God's kingdom of peace and unity a greater reality in this world? How can God's rule be more obvious than all the party politics of our day? How can we make justice and mercy and love and compassion the things that matter most in our daily lives?

These are the kingdom priorities that God wants his followers wrestling with – these are the focal themes of worship for God's followers. Believe me – I would love to get up here on Sundays and tell jokes and stories and just entertain all of you. That's going on in many churches these days – entertainment evangelism. But God has not called me or any other pastor to be a “Saturday Night Live Host on Sunday Morning.” God has said, “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” – keep it as a time to faithfully reflect the challenges of my Will and my Word for my followers. So in today's texts Jesus is not asking that we take him literally – we cannot perfect the law or be any more perfect than he already was. But he is asking that we take him very seriously! HE WANTS US TO GIVE A CLEAR FOCUS TO HIS KINGDOM IN THIS WORLD. And he wants us to do that *FIRST & FOREMOST* – not as an afterthought!

It's like the story of the novice artist who had just completed her first beautiful landscape. Her family lavishly praised her efforts; but her wise and talented uncle shook his head when he saw her painting. She was crushed by his response; she pleaded with him, “*Uncle, why don't you like it?!*” He responded: *“I like it very much ... I even love it for its technical greatness ... but it will not*

stand the test of time. Your picture has too many centers of interest ... a large tree over there ... a snow-capped mountain over here ... a crumbling fortress over there. In time, people will be confused about the focus of your picture's true subject; and even you will begin to dislike it. No true work of art can endure with too many centers of interest."

Likewise, life from God cannot endure with too many centers of interest and commitment. Our world will never be delivered from chaos & crime ... from greed and grossness as long as we continue to be "sort-of-Christians" ... always answering God, "But FIRST, I must do this or that!" So, how can we change? How can we be converted from worldly zig-zaggers to kingdom straight-shooters? There is only one way: First & Foremost, we need to be impassioned with the life of Jesus Christ!

Look at the life of Christ. Would you say that he was "sort-of-God" ... "sort-of-faithful" ... "sort-of-committed?" Jesus Christ was totally, completely and fully committed to serving us. When the Bible says, "he set his face for Jerusalem," that's not just a figure of speech ... that's total determination to be the love and mercy of God for each of us. Jesus was not "sort of" faithful to the will of God; he fulfilled the will of God "by loving the world so much that he gave his life for each of us" *to show us that the Way of Kingdom is the Way of Self-sacrifice!*

Jesus Christ did not have a multitude of centers of interest; he had one center of interest – BRINGING GOD'S KINGDOM TO RULE ON EARTH. A kingdom which seeks justice but leaves room for mercy; a kingdom which demands righteousness but ultimately offers forgiveness when we miss the mark; a kingdom which seeks the highest and the best for all people but does so with compassion, kindness, gentleness and self-control. A kingdom which inspired this nation to proclaim responsible independence for all – "where while in the pursuit of happiness, we make certain there is liberty and justice for all!" Nothing and no one interrupted Jesus from fulfilling this mission.

That's the good news for you and me – we are always first in God's sight ... nothing interrupts God's love, mercy and forgiveness for us. Is it any wonder that Jesus wants us to live with the same single-mindedness of mission?? Instead of answering the Call of the kingdom by saying, "But first I must do this or do that" ... Jesus calls us to be impassioned by his faithfulness: "But first and foremost, I must seek the kingdom of God, and then all the other good things will follow!"

Amen



*Pentecost IV  
First English Lutheran Church, Toledo  
June 16, 2002  
Peter R. Martyn, Part-time Interim*

## ***SOMETHING TO BOAST ABOUT!***

*... we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. Romans 5:3-5*

Suzette and Harold Kushner are two parents that many of you have come to know since the mid-1980's. Harold is best known for his best-seller, *WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE*. As many of you may also know, Harold and Suzette Kushner had been blessed with a little boy, Aaron. He was a bright and happy child; at the age of two, he could already identify a dozen different varieties of dinosaurs. But about the time that Aaron was reaching eight to nine months old, his parents became very concerned: their little boy stopped gaining weight ... and his hair starting falling out when he was a year old.

Prominent doctors were called in to see Aaron. But all they told Harold and Suzette was that Aaron would not grow very tall; and they attached other complicated names to his condition. Finally, with Suzette very pregnant again, the Kushners moved from New York to a Boston suburb where Harold became the rabbi of a local congregation. There they discovered a local pediatrician who was doing research in problems of children's growth and Aaron was introduced to that doctor.

Two months later – the very same day that their new little girl was born – this pediatrician visited Suzette in the hospital. He told Harold and Suzette on that visit that Aaron was suffering from a condition known as *PROGERIA* – “*rapid aging*.” He went on to say that Aaron would never grow much taller than three feet. He also told them that Aaron would have no hair on his body or his head ... and that he would look like a little old man while he was still a child. But most devastating – he told them that Aaron would die in his early teens. And much as this doctor had predicted – Aaron died two days after his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The obvious question confronting Harold and Suzette was: How could this happen to them? Harold was beginning a new rabbinic ministry – why should a man dedicated to God have to confront such devastating grief?! How could he possibly lose his treasured son at the age of 14?! How could life be so unfair??

*Page 2 – Something To Boast About*

**Much like many of us here today – the Kushners had grown up basically believing that “bad things only happened to bad people.” They had also grown up with some very inaccurate theological conclusions. Both Suzette and Harold had the notion that God caused suffering and tragedy to only wicked or evil people. Faced with the gloom and doom of the death of their son – they just couldn’t reconcile their early religious understanding with their present circumstances.**

**As Harold Kushner aptly points out in his book ... the onslaught of Aaron’s disease was the beginning of his book. And even though he didn’t write the book until fifteen years after his son’s prognosis – he came to the stark realization in those 15 years that SUFFERING, PAIN, AND TRAGEDY happen to faithful and righteous people as well as wicked and evil people.**

**Moreover, he came to the conclusion that God does not vindictively CAUSE suffering and pain – but He does NOT PREVENT us from experiencing suffering and pain either. As we know from Genesis, God the Father has created this world so that we might know his goodness and the goodness of life – but he has not given us a world without tribulation, grief and pain. And this is a lesson that almost all devout people have a most difficult time learning. We want to believe as FAITHFUL CONFESSORS that we will always be spared suffering and pain ... disease and tragedy.**

**But the facts of life and the facts of scripture just do not confirm that kind of fantasy. St. Paul makes it crystal clear from his letter to the Romans that suffering will be a reality for all believers. In fact, sometimes the faithful (especially in his day) suffered persecution and pain even more than others because of their deep convictions.**

**Whether addressed by Rabbi Kushner or by St. Paul – we all know that they are telling the truth: suffering, tribulation and pain are realities we all must confront! And when we confront them – we are all stymied by the same questions: How can this be? Why is this happening to me? This is so unfair!**

**As GOOD people (not perfect, but good) ... we’ve all had bad things happen to us or to those we care about. And we wish there was an easy theological answer that would make these bad things make more sense. But the only answer we have is that the world is filled with imperfection and a lot of human rebellion and foolishness. So, amidst all this imperfection and foolishness – how can we still endure ... how can we still have hope?**

**Again, I think the perfect answer to that question must wait for a later consultation with God himself. But there is an imperfect answer; it has been written as an anonymous poem often seen on funeral folders. Some**

*Page 3 – Something To Boast About*

would consider it theologically “light-weight.” That may be the case – but it seeks to reveal the same biblical truth as given by St. Paul today. The statement goes like this: *God has not promised skies always blue ... flower strewn pathways all our lives through. Nor has he promised sun without rain, joy without sorrow, or peace without pain. But he has promised strength for the day ... rest for the laborer ... and light along the way ... grace for our trials ... help from above ... unfailing sympathy and undying love.* It is only this “Undying Love” of God that gives us the endurance, character and hope to withstand the suffering and unfairness of our days.

So, as Paul says, how can “we boast in our sufferings” – or how can we have hope in the midst of suffering? Certainly St. Paul never intended that we become Christian sadists or masochists – that we become seekers of suffering. No – Paul is saying we have hope in the same way that Jesus had hope in the midst of his suffering: he trusted that God would deliver him!! That’s what produced ENDURANCE for Jesus – faithfulness is waiting for God’s method of deliverance ... whether that be prayer, medicine, surgery, counseling or resurrection. That’s what produced CHARACTER for Jesus – faithfulness is coming into this world to heal and care not to condemn and be vindictive. Jesus’ hope was the same as God’s hope: that the final word is not another expression of suffering and pain, but rather a word of healing, resurrection and new life – the victory of love over violence, jealousy, betrayal and human greed.

That is the same hope of which we boast – that our sufferings and tragedies drive us to trust NOT in ourselves but in God’s mercy and loving care. Thanks be to God that we can still boast – we still have hope even when all of our efforts have failed. We surrender into the merciful care of God – that is our ultimate source of hope ... that is what gives us the character to endure earthly calamities and terror. Thanks be to God’s everlasting grace we always have **SOMETHING TO BOAST ABOUT!!**

AMEN