

PENTECOST XIX

Luth Church of the Master  
Sept. 28, 1975

"THE INTEGRITY GAP"

"A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' And (the son) answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he repented and went. And he went to the second and said the same, and (this son) answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, "The first." Matt. 21:28b-31a

Earlier today - I asked Terry & Marti:  
Do you promise to raise and nurture Michelle in the Christian faith, bringing her to the services of worship; teaching her the creeds, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer; and helping her through our church schools and your example in the home to experience the promises and challenges of the Gospel?

More than six years ago, I said: I join you in marriage, Susan, to make you my wife for the length of our days; to hold and to keep you, in joy and sorrow, in prosperity and hardship, in health and sickness; to defend and to honor you, to love and to cherish you, and with you to keep God's holy word. I even had that memorized that day.

A short time ago, I asked each of you: Do you promise to share this same spirit of oneness - to aid in encouraging, sustaining, and sharing our faith and ministry with these new members?

EACH OF THESE - a very serious promise. Most of us have vowed to all these promises -- but none of us have fully delivered on any of them. How many other promises have we made - which we have turned around and broken? I can only believe most of you are like me -- MANY BROKEN PROMISES.

This is the dilemma of life -- but esp. the dilemma of faith. I call it = THE INTEGRITY GAP.

Integrity means "being whole" - integrated - having no cracks - having completeness. And the dilemma of the Christian life is the struggle with the gap -- the crack in one's Christian identity -- that gapping whole that falsifies our integrity as believers.

Such was the dilemma of the two sons. One said "yes" to his father, but didn't deliver. The other said "no" - but reconsidered, turned back to Dad and delivered.

What's the point from Jesus' perspective? Very simply, Rebellion is often NOT as serious as promises with performance.

And so it was that Jesus was often more troubled by the righteous and the pious THAN HE was by the prostitutes and grafters. More troubled because the pious so often made all the great promises -- yet failed to fulfill them. The perverted had only one way to go -- to make a turn about. Yet the pious failed to realize that faith requires the same of them.

And so the dilemma remains the same today. In fact - today the integrity gap almost seems at time to have societies stamp of approval. From the supermarket to the super-powers -- the message when finally decoded seems to be: promises without performance.

Example: Business promises to serve the customer. But is that really the truth or like so much of life, half true. Just a simple example - the service station. Low gas prices - got service. High gas prices - no service.

Politicians claim a concern for the whole country -- yet when it comes to the nitty-grit, they so often serve party or constituency interests ONLY. Re-election becomes prominent over social & world realities.

But this is really somewhat unfair. I'm pointing the finger out there -- and who says I can assume they live by the gospel principles. But we do - so what about us??

Already I've heard tons of excuses regarding the Marriage Tune-Up. Mostly - these have come from the male side. And that really bothers me.

For the past year - I've continually heard how many couples would delight in the opportunity to re-affirm their relationships. Both directly and indirectly -- I've heard this message.

And so the time for performance arrives -- and the promises go down the drain. A perfect opportunity to demonstrate Christian integrity -- to grow in love and trust -- to work at love just a slight bit as hard as we work at our almighty jobs -- but where's the hunger for performance???

I could understand reservation if this Marriage Tune-Up were a therapy session -- or a sensitivity session - or some other group encounter. But this will just be a VERY TAME OPPORTUNITY to work as couples in again saying to one another - I DO. And how often we fail to say that enough.

Then there's that order for receiving new members -- all those beautiful words about our CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER - OF HELPING EACH OTHER - OF WEEPING AND REJOICING - OF BEING INSPIRED BY GOD'S BURNING SPIRIT - OF ACCEPTING PEOPLE AS EQUALS - OF SEARCHING AND LEARNING -- OF GROWING AND RENEWING OURSELVES.

Are these just good pious thoughts -- or do we really mean them?? I esp. get concerned about this when I see only a few families doing the dirty work on that back berm.

But, please forgive me; I know I'm looking only at isolated examples. God only knows you have been a dedicated, loving community -- but he also knows that now and then we all need a good prod in the rearend.

And yet - he surely knows of the great demands on our lives. It is no easy job to DO JUSTICE to one's profession - to one's family - to one's neighbors - to one's church --- life does truly

challenge our integrity. God knows - and you and I know we often fall short in the performance division.

But thank God - we don't have to give up there. He doesn't leave us saying - I can't do it.

That is never our Christian response. Regardless of how lousy our performance was the last time -- regardless of how rebellious we were yesterday-- the Christian is never left WITH THIS GLOOMY FORECAST FOR THE FUTURE.

For we are given the example of the first son - an example of repentance - of turning back to God and the fellow workers in the vineyard - of turning back and saying:

Forgive me, Lord; Forgive me, brothers, sisters, Forgive me, children - wife, husband - business associates.

Through those moments where God gives us an opportunity to RESPOND ANEW -- much like we responded ANEW with the dilemma of our Organ situation -- through those moments we are reminded of God's constant promise TO US and performance THROUGH US.

Yes, his constant promise of mercy - NO MATTER HOW SCREWED UP WE THINK OUR LIVES HAVE BECOME -- his constant promise to help gets us out of neutral AND BACK INTO gear to perform - to respond to his love anew.

And that causes us to <sup>to regain our integrity</sup> turn around and say:  
Here I am Lord. Here I am, son. Here I am, father. Here I am, honey. Here i am, world.  
USE ME TO THE GLORY OF GOD.

AMEN

PENTECOST XIX  
Luth Church of the Master, Troy  
Sept. 24, 1978

"WHAT DO YOU THINK?"

Text: MATTHEW 21:28-32

What do you think? Suppose you have two children. And you ask both of them to do a job within their capabilities. One of them says "I won't," but then realizes he's wrong, and does the job. The other one says "I will," but then never does the job. What do you think of those two children? Which of them has done your will? Which response do you feel is most loving?

Jesus posed the same questions to the religious leaders of his day. The case he was pointing up was the case of religious Jews of his day. They had said "yes" to God -- they had said that they would do the will of God, but they didn't do it.

But the tax collectors, and prostitutes, and other outcasts HAD OREGINALLY rejected God and his will. But they turned around and in repentance DID HIS WILL. So Jesus asks these religious leaders WHO THEY THINK DID THE WILL OF HIS FATHER.

The leaders answered - the ones who originally said "NO," but then said "yes" and established a proper relationship with God.

What do you think? Quite frankly, I don't like the behavior of either of these groups! Nor do I like the behavior of children who either first refuse to do what is right (and later do it) or falsely promise to do it but never follow through. As far as I'm concerned - the best example would be PEOPLE, whether children or adults, who say "YES" to God and then FOLLOW THROUGH and do it.

And I think if Jesus had not been trying to make a point here in regard to these superficial JEWS -- I do believe that would have been his example as well.

Let's face it -- the best possible example we can offer each other is to say "YES" to those things that God

wants us to do -- and then to do them! Most of the laws THAT WE FOLLOW in our civic and private lives are based on this model. WE SAY YES to the laws and WE FOLLOW THEM because we believe that they reflect the will of God. So it is that we practice monogamy, and open housing, and freedom of speech, and shelter and food for all, and environmental control BECAUSE WE BELIEVE ALL THESE LAWS IN THEIR PURE FORM ARE GOD'S INTENTION FOR US.

So obviously - there is only ONE RIGHT WAY to think on this text before us -- and that behavior is having big and little children saying "YES" to God's intention for them and doing it!

But life wasn't quite so perfect in Jesus' day. Many of the people thought that because they were the chosen people -- they were on the right side of God regardless of what they did. So they said "yes" to God in words -- but their lives were a total contradiction. And Jesus wanted to smoke this out -- and notice he didn't confront the heathen with the question -- he confronted the religious leaders of his day. It was with them that he wanted to make his point known. For they were the very people who had said "yes" -- but were actually saying "NO" by the way that they lived.

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Obviously - this text EVEN TODAY is still directed at the religious leaders of our day. And who do you think they are?? Do you think they are synod leaders? Or possibly pastors? Or are they church councils? Or church committees? Or do we include all of the above and ourselves as well?

Well - I hope we've chosen the last answer. We believe in the priesthood of all believers -- each one of us at one time or another HAS SAID "YES" TO GOD -- we've all promised to be faithful. Jesus is now asking each of us PERSONALLY -- have you been faithful to that promise?

Jesus is really asking -- WHICH KIND OF IMPERFECT

PERSON HAVE YOU AND I BEEN? Have we been like the religious Jews of his day -- have we been the ones who say "Yes, Yes, Lord!" and then do nothing. Or have we been like the tax collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners -- who often say "No" first, but then repent and actually do the will of God??

Obviously - I can't answer that question for you. But you know within yourself the answer to the question. You know if you have said "yes" to God - and then turned your back on him in the way you live. You know if you have said "Yes" to God's church -- and then turned your back on God when he asks for your sacrifice through his church? You know and I know if God is getting the full fruits of our lives -- or merely getting the crumbs.

I sincerely hope that we haven't been playing this game with God -- because Jesus says we're taking a chance when we play charades with God. We may get away with it with each other -- but not with God.

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~~Yes~~ - Far better for us to admit our shortcomings -- far better to admit our mistakes -- far better to admit to God and each other THAT WE HAVE BEEN HOLDING BACK -- that we have been playing games with God.

God has lots of room for people like that -- for people who have the courage to admit their imperfection -- for people who can change -- for people who once didn't even give God the left-overs but are now giving him their first fruits.

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I've only been at the Master for four years. But I've seen some glorious transformations in those four short years.

I've seen people who use to say "NO" to everything that God asked of them -- and now they almost say "YES" too often -- because sometimes they let their own families down when they say YES. But even though they may have a family fight or two over this -- there's

there's something far more significant HAPPENING IN THOSE LIVES. They are radiating the very life that Jesus gave for us. And that's never an easy life to give. But what greater life can be given than a life given for others!?!?

Yes, I've not only seen individuals -- but I've seen a whole church which often said "NO" first -- but now it's saying "Yes" to God and his mission. These have been some great sacrificial years at the Master. And with God's help and direction -- the sacrificial - satisfactory years will continue.

But dare I paint things too rosey -- I also know sometimes VERY DEEPLY and painfully what Jesus was talking about when he referred to those who said "YES"-- but never followed through.

Every ~~body of Christ~~ <sup>family of God</sup> has had its fair share of so-called believers WHO SAY "YES" To God and their fellow members at this altar rail - and then they go on living hardly giving God or his people the time of day. A token contribution here or there -- an occasional worship service here or there -- and they've got the gall to think THAT THEY BELIEVE IN GOD. And the most hurtful cases to me are the ones whom I have taught in catechism -- the ones whom I have tried to show how serious that "Yes" is on confirmation day -- only to have them turn their backs on the greatest Father of all (AND THAT'S NOT ME!).

But Jesus makes very clear in chapter 23 of Matthew the way God feels about these hypocrites.

As for the rest of us -- we may not be perfect -- we may too often say "No" to God when we know we should have said "yes." But we need not be hypocrites -- we need only repent when we have short-changed our Lord -- and then get on with it -- and offer his mercy - his compassion - his helping hand to ANYONE WHO WILL RECIEVE IT.

AMEN



PENTECOST 19  
Hope Lutheran Church., Toledo  
October 14, 1979

"THE CHOICE IS YOURS"

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea." Mark 9:42

There is a great modern parable told about two children, a boy and a girl, in a certain city. And it came to pass that summer had passed away, and the fall chill was in the air. And the boy said to the girl, "Come! Let us arise and go to our church, for it is time for us to be involved in Sunday Church School. There we will find a teacher who will teach us the way of truth, the way of life, and the way of love of the Savior."

And so they went with haste to the place where the teacher was to be. Now it happened that when they arrived -- they found no teacher present. Being greatly troubled they cried out: "Where is our teacher?!!!" And behold, they were told: "Not one could be found to teach about Jesus Christ. All are too busy and have no time."

But the little girl said: "Surely, in all this great congregation, there is one who cares about my belief in Jesus." She turned quickly to the boy and said, "Come, let us go quickly and find this one, so that knowledge of Christ may be increased in this land." So they went out into the community to find the teacher.

And coming to the home of Mrs. X, they besought her to teach them the things of Christ. "Alas," she said, "I have small children of my own, so I cannot teach. Get someone without small children to teach you."

At the home of Mrs. Y, they heard this saying, "My children are all grown, and I am weary of well doing. Let those whose children are in school do the teaching."

So onward they went to Mr. Z - but he told them: "Teaching is a task for women. I have great and weighty matters on my mind -- I must attend to the important business of life. Therefore, find yourself another teacher."

And so their day went on. One said to them: "Truly, truly I say to you -- children give me a large pain in the back of my neck. Leave me in peace." FROM ANOTHER THEY HEARD: "I work all week long, and I must have rest on Sunday. " Yet FROM ANOTHER they heard: "I have not the wisdom nor the ability to speak to you of my faith. You will have to search elsewhere."

Being greatly saddened and dejected, the two children sat themselves upon the curb to talk. "With no one to teach me about the faith," the little girl said, "could it be that there is no truth in it -- could it be that our elders really do not believe or think it important."

The little boy answered: "What you say must surely be so. Therefore, let us arise and be done with all this foolishness about faith. Let us give ourselves over to those things which our elders have taught us to be important. Henceforth, we shall lie in comfort in our beds on Sunday -- and there we shall learn much wisdom from the comic pages. And behold, they did just that!!

And Jesus said: Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea."

This modern parable sheds light on one of the great tragedies played out by Christians every day: THE REFUSAL TO AFFIRM GOD'S CALL TO SERVE.

Obviously -- this refusal can show itself in many ways. The most striking is that which is illustrated through the parable -- a direct and

outright refusal TO EDIFY GOD'S MISSION ON EARTH.

As the Pope said in his sermon last Sunday - our actions do speak louder than our words. By what we do - or don't do -- we do convey to the world what we are for -- and what we are against. And some of us -- by our actions SEEM TO BE COMMUNICATING THAT WE ARE AGAINST GOD -- in a very outright and blatant way.

In our moral lives -- all of us show actions which communicate an alienation from God's will for us in the Ten Commandments. Through our hands -- often with our mouths -- sometimes with our feet -- many times from our eyes -- we act against the will of God. But thank God that we are not ultimately judged by our moral perfection-- but rather by our ultimate commitment to his mercy.

But how sad -- that we should continue to receive his mercy -- and often be unwilling to share it. For instance -- this past week the financial officer told me that more than 100 giving units at Hope have not yet GIVEN ONE CENT TO GOD'S MISSION OF MERCY THROUGH HOPE LUTHERAN.

Obviously - giving money to God's mission IS ONLY one way that we extend his mercy in the world. But it is one of the most tangible ways in our modern world that we can extend his mercy. So it is that Jesus says to those who refuse to give, or to teach, or to worship, or to offer any tangible service for his kingdom: IT WOULD BE BETTER TO HANG A MILLSTONE AROUND THEIR NECKS AND THEY BE THROWN INTO THE SEA.

You see -- Jesus at times was very straightforward -- he was not mamby-pamby when it came TO BEING FOR HIM -- or AGAINST HIM.

But let us also look at the tremendous response of those for him at Hope: today we install more than 100 people into Christian leadership at Hope.

And if we counted all the supported members who back up these leaders on a regular week to week basis -- we could have over 200 people standing here today. That means nearly 33% of our confirmed members are SPECIFICALLY INVOLVED IN a ministry of mercy through this congregation.

I want to say on behalf of **all** of you -- thanks be to God for your choice: YOU HAVE HEARD THE CALL FROM YOUR LORD -- and you have responded with a tangible commitment of time, energy and resources. You have committed your hands, your feet, and your eyes TO BUILDING UP THE WAY OF TRUTH, THE WAY OF LIFE, AND THE WAY OF LOVE ON EARTH.

But dare we edify ourselves to much at this point -- we must look back at today's text and see the more subtle form of refusal that Christian disciples sometimes display.

The disciples had encountered an exorcist who was not a so-called "card carrying" member of Jesus' official gang. John tells Jesus that they told this guy where to get off -- because he was not an official part of their group. And Jesus rebukes the disciples for their narrow-exclusiveness.

We run the same risk today. A great temptation of believers is to expect everyone to play from the same rulebook. That was surely made clear for us through the recent papal visit. To any outsider -- it would have surely appeared as if there was only one way to interpret issues of doctrine and morality.

Yes - a more subtle form OF BEING AGAINST GOD is that church, or that organization, or that group within a church, or that fellowship which tries to control God -- which tries to convey A SINGLE, ABSOLUTE, AUTHORITATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S JUDGMENT AND MERCY.

Jesus strongly cautions us about being intolerant of Christians who are different from us -- who pray differently, or heal differently, or worship differently. Jesus Christ will tolerate all kinds of diversity -- as long as <sup>there</sup> ~~is a commitment~~ his merciful purpose of feeding those who are hungry -- clothing those who are naked -- visiting those who are imprisoned, ~~or~~ lonely, *sick or bereaved.*

Yes - the real issue facing Jesus' disciples throughout the ages has been: What have we done for God in gratitude for his mercy to us?? Have our actions shown that we are FOR GOD-- or AGAINST GOD?

Or to put it more specifically -- Does anyone love God more because of me?? Does anyone love God more because of you?? Have you and I exemplified Christian attitudes and actions in such a way that PEOPLE AROUND US CAN'T WAIT TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

In short, are you and I choosing to make our lives opportunities which count for God? ~~not against God?~~ Does our faith cause others to rejoice -- or do we cause others to stumble?

It is my hope and prayer -- that you and I will forever choose to be merciful like Christ -- so that we will never have to even think about having a millstone hung around our necks.

AMEN

PENTECOST XIX

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

October 19, 1982

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"THE GOOD HANDS PEOPLE"

"For he that is not against us is for us. For truly I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward. ... (But) if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell." Mark 9:40-41; 43

Almost all of us here this morning have either seen or heard the clever advertising which says, "your in Good Hands with Allstate." Allstate claims to be the good hands people. Obviously the emphasis of this particular insurance company is to capitalize on the fact that there is SECURITY... there is real support when one is insured through them. Allstate wants each of us to believe that we can trust the hands of their agents in a time of crisis. One can hardly deny that their marketing strategy is most effective. In times of crisis - we want helping hands ... we want supportive persons that we can trust in

In a very different way I have been caught up with that same reality throughout these past two weeks. To watch the hands of the carpenters fashioning our renovation each day is to truly observe the constructive genius of three men. Six hands that have been daily committed to molding, splicing, pounding, and shaping a new reality in time and space. Their creative genius transforms blueprint lines, circles and numbers into exciting new space for worship. For one who cannot use his hands in that way -- there is great awe and majesty in these hands of reconstruction and design.

I am certain that if I spent the majority of my waking hours in an operating room I would have the same fascination with the skilled hands of the surgeon who daily refashions, and renews life. What a creative genius there is in the skill of those hands!

Yes, whether the hands of a great musician or the hands of a superstar on the gridiron -- there is great awe and majesty in seeing hands that are committed to uplifting life, to creating newness of life, to supporting life, to bringing new wonder and ecstasy to life, to giving life

new potential, new direction, and new opportunities. Yes these kinds of hands of humanity are truly the hands of God in this world.

In this morning's text from St. Mark -- not only do we hear the importance of entrusting our lives to the care of God's hands -- but we hear that God's hands are really yours and mine when they are committed to uplifting and healing the lives of others. These are the good hands people, because these are the good hands people of God.

In the opening section of this text, the disciples question Jesus -- because another healer (who does not bear their Christian identity) is doing acts of healing in Jesus' name. The disciples actually seek to forbid this man from healing. But Jesus responds by saying: "he that is not against us is for us." In short, Jesus says BE TOLERANT of other religious orders THAT ARE ABOUT THE BUSINESS OF HEALING. Jesus is saying: Identity is not most important; denomination is not the ultimate of religious life; religious organization is not the goal of our life together in faith. The goal of our discipleship is not merely to give it a label -- but what we do for one another once we have that label.

Jesus is concerned with what we do with our hands, our eyes, our feet. He's saying: Religious identity is not the goal of our faith, BUT RATHER RELIGIOUS EXERCISE!! So you're a Lutheran, a Catholic, a Methodist, a Jew, a Moslem --- this is not the heart of your religious life... it's what you offer in the name of that label that counts. How are you serving the suffering, the unemployment, the needy of the world WITH YOUR HANDS, YOUR EYES, YOUR FEET?

Jesus says: Be tolerant of those who have different religious labels as long as they are about the business of the kingdom. Don't worry about the Jew down the street who is not yet a Lutheran if he has already employed his life to HEAL AND GIVE HOPE TO HUMANITY. As long as that person is not denouncing me as the Son of God -- then be tolerant.

But the text goes further than mere tolerance. Jesus realized how much time his disciples spent (and still spend) judging the religious life of others. So he wastes no time getting the focus back on his own followers (YOU & ME!)

As often - he deals with some very specific realities of our life rather than merely talking about cerebral or theological concepts. He says -- look at some of the greatest gifts God has given you -- YOUR HANDS, YOUR EYES, YOUR FEET. (and today he might include your billfold). And then he's saying: How are these religious appendages glorifying God?? Using James' metaphor -- Jesus urges us to consider -- HOW HAVE WE SUBMITTED OURSELVES TO GOD WITH OUR HANDS, OUR EYES, OUR FEET, OUR MONEY??

To get at the issue - Jesus frames the question in the negative: "If your hand has caused you to sin, then cut it off -- because it has not glorified God!" Obviously Jesus is not seeking that we take this literally.

Regretfully - there have been some followers who have taken Jesus literally here. I knew of a college student who had a wild temper. One day a heated argument with a college friend caused him to explode -- striking his friend to the ground with such a blow that his friend lost the sight of one eye. Obviously - he felt great remorse -- esp as he recalled Jesus' words, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." So on a cold, wintry day, he descended the basement steps and submitted his hand through the open furnace door UNTIL HIS HAND WAS BURNED USELESS.

Jesus had not intended such self-punishment -- Jesus in this verse as in other places in scripture WAS USING THE CONVENTION OF HYPERBOLE -- the use of exaggeration to make a point. The positive corrolary to Jesus words here is that GOD HAD CREATED OUR HANDS, EYES, FEET IN ORDER THAT LIFE MIGHT BE SERVED AND GLORIFIED -- NOT EXPLOITED!!

Jesus is saying here -- think more deeply about your faith than merely what it means to be a Lutheran -- think about what that means for YOUR hands, your eyes, your feet. How are you and I showing that we are the good hands people of God?? What has our religious identity done for our hands, eyes, feet, and other gifts?? To what degree do these apendages uplift, support, undergird, and show mercy to others??

Two hands that hold all kinds of reading material each day. But how often are the words of that material merely



self-serving or corruptive to my life?? How often do these hands hold the Word of God??? Only on Sunday morning for 55 minutes?? Are these hands like the majority of hands in this world -- where only 12% of Americans read scripture regularly. Here's the best reading material, the best news the world can get its hands on -- yet more than 85% of the world is more interested in stock returns or the Playboy centerfold.

Those same hands of the world are constantly on the grab -- always grabbing for more, yet conveniently giving less. Recent tax changes even encourage decreases in giving. The hands of the world say MORE, MORE, MORE for me, (as again was illustrated this week by Chrysler employees after the first profit report in months). Far too many hands in the world see life only as a never-ending grab-bag.

So Jesus says to these uses of our hands - CUT THEM OFF. Not meaning, "cut off your hands," but cut off the selfishness in your heart. Take a surgical knife and do some painful self-surgery -- cut away that self-centered lifestyle that prevents humanity from entering into the fulness of life. Use your hands for their God-intended purpose: TO GIVE YOUR FULL MEASURE OF LIFE TO PEOPLE AROUND YOU.

In short -- Jesus is urging us to live up to the potential of our God-given talents and abilities. As was recently illustrated here at Hope when we were asked to serve a 200-member band playing at the Glass Bowl -- requests went to 30 of our high school teens and their parents. Only one response was received! Not even a telephone call of regret from the other 29. And so instead of more than 150 hands to help prepare a meal -- we had four -- plus a dozen more who graciously gave last minute support.

Obviously - this was only one negative illustration of how we were not the good hands people of God. I could share 10 very positive illustrations of how our SCS, WDS, VCS, choirs, committees have been the God's good hands people -- in two weeks we show our good hands at Luther Home of Mercy.

But this experience with the McDowell bank does illustrate that our POTENTIAL is often so much greater than our RESPONSE. The words of Jesus thru St. Mark today remind us so clearly

that the church's mission is a CORPORATE RESPONSE -- that the church cannot rely on only a few to carry the load - or it will fail to really GLORIFY GOD in this world. Like the carpenters in our sanctuary -- only as all three work as a team will the job reflect THE GOOD HANDS TREATMENT!

God has offered us more than a token commitment -- he offered his whole life. His hands offered more than comfort to the bereaved ... more than food to the hungry ... more than directions to the confused -- his hands bore the total marks of servanthood and sacrifice ... of supreme commitment to others. The hands of Jesus Christ were the good hands of God ... because they were hands that reflected total giving and sharing rather than merely getting in life. The hands of Jesus Christ were consistent with his identity-- they were the extension of his faith -- they uplifted, supported, affirmed, and rebuilt the lives of those around him.

God has given us hands for more than grabbing. Like expert surgeons or carpenters - God has given us good hands to support and reform life around us.

God has given us eyes for more than exploitation. The eyes of God's people look for opportunities for service ... offer insight for caring and sharing ... reflect perception to see the deeper needs of those suffering in the world.

The feet of God's people have been made for more than jogging and jockeying for position. The feet have been made to enter his sanctuary on Sunday -- not only to enter Running Marathons. I believe its time that the people of God put their feet down and say: Enough is enough regarding those activities which deny and disrupt the community of faith on Sunday mornings.

Yes - thanks be to God that he has given us the hands to serve others ... the eyes to see the needs and suffering of others ... and the feet to carry us into the arenas of life where we can best serve others.

Let's get on with the Good Hands of God -- receiving his cup to quench our thirst for his love -- and then offering his cup of love with our hands wherever we see that hunger around us.

AMEN

PENTECOST XIX

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

October 2, 1983 (World Communion Sunday)

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"THE SAME SIGN -- YESTERDAY, TODAY, TOMORROW!"

And Abraham said, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead." Luke 16:31

Over the centuries, the parable of the rich man (known as Dives) and Laurus has received many interesting interpretations. Some preachers have used the parable as an opportunity to attack the rich. According to these pastors, wealth is made out to be the greatest of all evils.

Such sermons miss the central point of the parable. Obviously, riches can cause a person to become indifferent to human need. We've all known someone for whom money has hardened the heart and blinded the eyes. But Jesus is not seeking to put down the possession of wealth in this parable. He is, of course, urging the responsible use of possessions.

But contrasted to this attack on the rich, some preachers have used the parable to proclaim that all the poor will have a privileged ticket to heaven. Seeming to get their logic from the parable, they say that those who suffer here will receive great rewards in heaven. This notion gives instant sainthood to the poor. Nothing could be a more gross oversimplification of the parable.

A great temptation for many preachers is to make this a heelfire and brimstone sermon. (I've probably even done that in my 15 years of preaching). Here the emphasis goes something like this: "Give to the poor and needy, or go to hell!" There may be some validity in such a position, but again it simply makes Christianity into a system of rewards and punishments. Jesus wants to make clear that the kingdom of God is more than a glorified Girl Scout organization.

Commentator Richard Hoefler says: "The threat of hell and the reward of heaven never create the kind of Christian that Christ desires. God is not a merchant selling passage into heaven, nor is he a judge rewarding the winner with a prize at the end of the race. Rather he is a father whose only

desire is that his children love freely and spontaneously WITHOUT THOUGHT OF REWARDS OR PUNISHMENT!"

Another common sermon strain is to emphasize the legalistic principle of Scripture: "Share NOW, before it's too late!" Obviously, there is truth in this position. We all know only too well how sensual satisfaction can become an end in itself. Our world suffers greatly today because of a social mandate: LIVE ONLY FOR THE PLEASURE OF TODAY AND FORGET ABOUT EVERYTHING ELSE." Against such hedonism, it is very tempting to use this parable as ammunition. But we dare not jump to that conclusion without looking closely at the 1st three verses of the parable:

Dives says to Abraham: "I beg you, father, to send to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment." But Abraham responds "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." Again Dives says: "No Father, Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent (change their ways). Abraham again responds: "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead!"

Throughout Jesus' ministry he was continually confronted by followers who were demanded SPECIAL SIGNS. They were never satisfied that he was the Messiah sent from God. They always wanted more; they were always crying - That sign is not enough -- show us a more spectacular sign that you are the Christ!"

Right from the beginning of Jesus' ministry he is confronted by the devil demanding "special and dramatic signs" -- demanding that he make stones into bread and hurl himself from the pinnacle of the temple. This goes on and on through his ministry -- until on Golgatha they are still crying out for spectacular signs: "If you are the Christ, then come down from the cross!" All throughout his ministry he is plagued by the Pharisees, by the rich, even by the common man demanding: "That is not enough! Show us a special sign."

And throughout his ministry Jesus continued to refuse those demands -- to make faith into magic! Commentator Hoefler says: "God does not desire to force people to believe by glaring proof and spectacular acts - but rather by his spoken Word and sacraments. God has spoken through the

Moses, the prophets, the evangelists, pastors, teachers, and millions of saints since. He carefully prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah. God says to the Jews through this parable: I have given you a rich heritage in Moses, the prophets, through the ages -- if you cannot recognize the Messiah in this great light -- then you no longer deserve the blessing of the kingdom!

The meaning of the parable is simple and direct. God will not be bribed into giving special, spectacular signs of his love. He has acted once and for all in Jesus Christ -- and that is enough!

For you and me - the message is exactly the same: God has given us HIS Word -- in Holy Scripture and through the sacraments! His word and sacraments are the same sign for yesterday, today and tomorrow!! Nothing more will be given for nothing more is needed!!

Regretably - for many people God's word and sacraments are not enough. They demand scientific proof! They will only believe in Christ when they can actually see him -- nail holes and all. They want spectacular signs -- they are not satisfied with God's Word of love through scripture and sacraments. Just like the Pharisees of old -- they are always saying: "This is not enough! We want special signs -- we want more than is offered in worship, in preaching, in the sacraments!"

These people says "word and sacraments are not enough." We want a spectacular sign -- we want an ecstatic inner experience. Or we want a vision of the cross in the sky. Or we want to hear the audible voice of Christ calling us. Or we want some special favors from Christ if he is really the Messiah -- like we want our loved one restored to perfect health -- we want success in our business venture -- we want to be assured of no pain or suffering in the future.

To all such requests for spectacular signs -- this parable says: "NO! The word and the sacraments are all you need. No spectacular signs are necessary! For faith is believing in God's love even when the signs of our lives would make us feel that God has deserted us. He has not!! His Word and his Sacraments are the proof of his love and forgiving power!

Sadly, but truly, there are many who demand more of God than the signs he has already given. Like the rich man Dives, there are many in every congregation (incl Hope) who sit back all their lives FEEDING THEMSELVES LUXURIOUSLY and totally overlooking God's mission and the needs of the world. Like Dives - you will rarely see these persons reverencing the regular signs of God's love -- you will rarely see these persons worshipping God and receiving the Sacraments. They are waiting for some spectacular sign to get them off their duffs and involved in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Regretfully -- many times, like Dives, it's too late!! They wait and wait and wait -- and one day, they no longer have the opportunity to any longer receive the Word or Sacraments. Why is it that so many seem to be waiting to be clobbered over the head WITH A SPECIAL SIGN before they will respond to the LOVING WORD OF GOD.

I can't answer for all those -- even though I know there are many who claim membership in this congregation. But I can answer for you and me -- those of us who have gathered here today -- and the millions upon millions who will gather like us in churches around the world. Our presence in this place graphically shows our concern for the Gracious Word of God and his Sacraments. We are here because we know the the SIGNS OF GOD'S LOVE HAVE NOT CHANGED. Yesterday, today, tomorrow -- the signs of God's love do no change.

Those signs manifest themselves as we hear the word -- as we confess our sinfulness -- as we receive the bread and wine of his body and blood -- as we offer our money and abilities to glorify his love in the world -- as we go forth to serve the impoverished and needy of the world.

For millions upon millions of Christians -- a small piece of bread; a little sip of wine -- these are the same signs given to the first disciples; they will be the same signs for the last disciples; and they continue to be the signs of God's loving power THAT CHANGE HUMAN BEINGS from selfish, greedy, guilt-ridden sinners INTO sacrificing, serving, celebrating saints!

AMEN

PENTECOST XIX  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
September 28, 1986  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## "LOVE LETTERS WITH NO RESPONSE"

"Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria ... (Amos 6:1)" "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil ... (I Tim. 6:8)" "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead!" Luke 16:31

There is a touching but tragic story told from a former parish about the lives of a very wealthy man and his son. In many ways, it was a beautiful family -- plenty of money, all the comforts, sincere efforts to be supportive and family-oriented, and deeply committed to regular church attendance. The father had given his son everything that any son could ever want -- wealth, prominence, purposeful goals, and even a Pontiac Firebird upon his graduation from high school. What more could any son ever desire. But just before the boy left for an exclusive private college, he and his father had a horrible falling-out! It was one of those moments of anger and hostility which did not see resolution before the son left for college.

After a few weeks of college, the situation had so eaten into the heart of the father that he had to seek reconciliation. Distance and circumstances made a personal visit impossible. So the father telephoned; but the son would not receive his phone calls. Although it was a great sacrifice of time and energy, the father finally resorted to writing daily letters to his son.

From the first letter on -- the father continually asked for forgiveness and assured his son of his deep love. Every letter that followed gave the latest news but also contained special expressions of love. Each day the father waited for a response. But none came. His only consolation was that the letters were not returned; he hoped his message was getting through.

Finally, one day the college called the father with bad news: his son had been killed in an auto accident. They asked the father to come immediately to identify the body and pick up his son's personal belongings.

With a heavy heart, the father made hasty plane reservations and journeyed to the college town. He was particularly grieved that their last spoken words had been so hostile and childish. His only consolation were the many love letters he had written. Upon entering his son's dormitory room - he found all the letters that he had written. But tragically, not one of them had ever been opened.

How must it feel to a father TO WRITE SO MANY LOVE LETTERS WITH NO RESPONSE -- not even the response of opening one of them ... no knowledge, no understanding, no awareness of his deep love and forgiveness. How many times has that story been repeated among hundreds of families and friends? Possibly different circumstances - but the same basic reality: LOVE LETTERS WITH NO RESPONSE!

But that's more than the story of a rich family in Milwaukee, Wisconsin ... or of any rich family in Toledo, Ohio. It's God's story about all of us at one time or another. God blesses us with the abundance of his love -- with material goods, with family relationships, with dedicated teachers, prophets, evangelists and pastors, with a host of loving and caring relationships -- AND FOR THIS MULTITUDE OF LOVE LETTERS, THERE ARE MILLIONS WHO OFFER NO RESPONSE ... OR AT MOST, AN INDIFFERENT MESSAGE OF "I BELIEVE IN GOD" TO THE LATEST GALLUP POLE.

The lessons today warn all of us -- both inside and outside of the church -- that we can easily develop a "rich kid mentality" toward God and his world. We must be very clear in these lessons -- God is saying nothing against the wealthy. Being rich is neither immoral or sinful in any way. This parable certainly does not say (as some pastors have interpreted it) that the rich "go to hell" and the poor "go to heaven." But it does raise some very serious warnings for all of us who are "rich kids" -- and that includes all of us in this room.

The rich son of the wealthy Milwaukeean suffered from three pitfalls: 1) he forgot from whom his wealth came; 2) he forgot gratitude and became insolent and indifferent toward those who loved him the most; and 3) he forgot for whom his wealth was intended.

It is one thing to have a falling out with a parent; it is quite another to forget THAT PARENTS (BY AND LARGE) HAVE GENEROUSLY GIVEN US ALL THAT WE HAVE. How tragic that this son totally forgot his father's generosity for the 18 years that preceded his college entrance -- and the thousands of dollars for that college education -- ALL OF THIS GIVEN OUT OF LOVE AND DEDICATION TO HIS SON!

The same is so true between God and each of us. Certainly we have all had our "falling outs" with God at one time or another. Some of us have had serious illnesses; others have encountered tragic accidents; all of us have had our moments of doubt and despair; many of us have had to suffer irrational and unjust pain, hurt, and crises. But which of us can honestly say that we have not been blessed with more than an abundance of love both materially and spiritually?? We in America - even among our welfare



recipients -- can any of us justifiably cry of real poverty?? There can be little doubt about it -- we can claim to be nothing but "rich kids." And our wealth, both spiritually and materially, has come from no one other than God Almighty. He is the Father who has blessed us so abundantly in this great land.

In light of God's abundant generosity - can we Americans justify a policy of trickle-down economics?? Can we possibly say that God has just "trickled down" a little to us? Has he not given us a land flowing with milk and honey -- in fact, a land so rich in agriculture that we can't even find buyers for our surplus goods? We are so wealthy and productive that our farmers are literally going into poverty because WE HAVE TOO MUCH: WE DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH ALL OUR SURPLUS!!

God help us from a trickle-down mentality. Just like a certain rich kid in Milwaukee, God our Father has heaped upon us much generosity. He does not ask for a trickle-down response: he asks for proportionate giving. AS YOU HAVE BEEN BLESSED - SO SHALL YOU BLESS OTHERS! That's the spirit and response of God's "rich kids" - for they know from whom their riches have come!!

But God has a second warning for all "rich kids." DO NOT FORGET GRATITUDE BY INSOLENCES & INDIFFERENCE TO THE GIVER! The "rich kid" from Milwaukee was playing Russian Roulette with life ... and particularly with his father. He knew he was wrong ... he knew he was being ungrateful ... but he figured he would punish his old-man for a while with the silent, insolent treatment. Is it any wonder that God says one of the greatest temptations of the rich is to become ungratefully indifferent -- to think that their wealth gives them control of the universe and therefore they need not be accountable to anyone. In short, they can play the game by their own rules. I have seen many a wealthy man use his pocketbook to get things his way ... or withdraw his gifts when things don't go his way. (criminal)

There's one great fallacy with this ungrateful indifference -- there may be no time for a change of mind. The boy from Milwaukee held out too long -- he died an indifferent death - creating a hell for himself and his whole family. The message of the parable is very clear: NOW IS THE TIME TO BE GRATEFUL; TOMORROW MAY BE TOO LATE.

I am amazed daily at the thousands of "rich kids" in our society who continue to play Russian Roulette with God. They keep on waiting until tomorrow to "offer thanks to God for what he has first given them." They see no urgency in the gospel; they see no suffering in the world; they simply continue to BUILD THEIR BARNES BIGGER AND BIGGER, never

perceiving the ultimate foolishness of their own greed.

We can be thankful to God and the Lutheran tradition for our hard line against indifference among our kids. We urge an intensive catechism program for all our teenagers. We do this because we believe that 12, 13 and 14-yr olds need to realize that they have been abundantly blessed by God ... especially through their parents. But there comes a time when they can no longer be indifferent to God's blessings -- there comes a time when God calls upon them for more than a childish response to his blessings -- there comes a time when they must begin TO BLESS OTHERS, AS GOD HAS BLESSED THEM. That's why we have an intensive 3-yr program of catechism -- to teach our children that there's a responsibility in being a "rich kid" of God ... that he expects more than indifference from those who proclaim him as Lord and Savior!

Be assured, I am deeply saddened by the hundreds of "rich kids" who have been confirmed at Hope Church but are never seen again. Likewise, I am even more angered by those who won't even encourage their children - saying we're expecting too much (other priorities) ... these will be like a certain "rich kid" from Milwaukee -- who ultimately lost ... and lost big!! But I commend the young confirmands who are here today ... and return week after week to further love and be inspired by their Father. And I commend the parents who encourage this example. You are living examples of the meaning of confirmation -- that we are confirmed TO BE FAITHFUL AND GRATEFUL DISCIPLES WHO SEEK TO SHARE THE RICHES THAT OUR FATHER HAS GIVEN TO US.

Finally, God warns all "rich kids" through this parable FOR WHOM HIS RICHES WERE INTENDED! Somewhere along the way, the rich boy in Milwaukee had totally lost sight his reason for being. Somehow his 18-years had taught him that the world owed him a free ride.

But the Christian faith has never said it that way. Jesus said: "I came into the world not to be served, but to serve." Our riches are never ours to keep, but ours to share. That is the love of God -- that he came into the world not to receive, but to offer himself as a living sacrifice. To love God is to offer the riches he has given to all in need. Too often, too many are too much like the lad in Milwaukee -- they are only concerned about getting their own fill.

It's like the story of David Rockefeller of the Chase Manhattan Bank. He was traveling through South America to meet with a group of bank officials of the government of Uruguay - obviously, the group was hoping for a loan. They had invited him for lunch at a club, locally famous for its magnificent appetizer buffet.

Rockefeller passed through the line first. Thinking

the buffet was the entire meal, he served himself very generously. Once seated, he noticed his portion was astronomical compared to the others. Somewhat embarrassed, he said to the president of the Banco Central, "I have so much ... and you have so little." To which the host president responded: "I'm glad you mentioned it, because that's exactly what we wanted to talk to you about."

David Rockefeller, hardly intending it, had just opened his own door to be a blessing. That's the mission of Jesus Christ - to open our lives to bless others as we have been blessed. Never like before has this mission been more urgent.

The chasm between the rich man (known as Dives) and Lazarus is even more pronounced today than at the time of this parable. Dives could not see that his response to the "street-person" outside his gate was a prelude to his own destiny. Dives had no desire to distribute his abundance to anyone -- least of all to a beggar at his gate. Dives' religion was one of empty words -- without faithful deeds. The parable's point cannot be missed: faithful disciples respond to the needs of their neighbors.

Tragically, God says to the son who never responded to his father's love letters: Is it true that you had many opportunities to forgive and forget, but you made no response?! To Dives God says: Is it true that you had hundreds of opportunities to feed Lazarus, but instead you passed by saying: "Why doesn't somebody do something about getting that bum off the streets?" To us God says: Are you a blessing to the degree that you have been blessed? Have you responded faithfully and generously to the LOVE LETTERS YOU HAVE RECEIVED FROM ME?

Our presence here is a clear sign that we have not left God's love letters UNOPENED! You and I are the brothers and sisters of Dives ... and Lazarus. We have heard Moses and the prophets and many more ... God's love letters are crystal clear: we are to be a blessing to BOTH RICH AND POOR ALIKE.

God help us to be the "rich kids" that he intended us to be: deeply aware FROM WHOM OUR RICHES HAVE COME ... DEEPLY GRATEFUL TO HIM WHO HAS GIVEN US GREAT ABUNDANCE ... AND GENEROUSLY RESPONSIVE TO THE NEEDS OF THE HUNGRY AND HOPELESS. Above all, let it never be said that the people of Hope suffer from the "rich kid mentality."

AMEN.

ST. LUKE, EVANGELIST (Pentecost 19)  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
October 18, 1987  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## "THE DOCTOR'S ORDERS!"

"This is what is written: the Messiah must suffer and must rise from death three days later, and in his name the message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations, ... You are my witnesses of these things. And I myself will send upon you what my Father has promised. But you must wait in the city until the power from above comes down upon you." Luke 24:46-49

Today we recognize a great, early Christian doctor - St. Luke. It's a very appropriate day to be celebrating Luke's ministry as an evangelist and doctor. In Larson Hall - the topic will be Hospital Ethics Committees; Pastor Bob's study focuses upon miracles. It appears this is the day we take a closer look at THE DOCTOR'S ORDERS, especially the orders of Dr. Luke. But why ... why would a successful physician, like Luke, give up his medical practice to become an evangelist?? One thing's for certain -- he didn't do it to make more money! And he probably didn't do it for professional recognition -- because just like today, physicians then had a clear edge over pastors as far as personal pomp was concerned. So what motivated Luke not only to write an account of Christ's life -- but also a whole history of the early church (the book of Acts)?

Well, Luke never told us why! So all we can do is speculate. And I figure my speculation is as good as the scholars on this one. I think Luke became an evangelist because as a good physician he was VERY FAMILIAR WITH HUMAN PAIN. And like any good physician - Luke wanted to remedy and reduce human pain. But he realized there was one human condition beyond his capability: THE HUMAN PAIN OF SIN. No physician could possibly cure the brokenness and alienation in the world -- yet it has always been the cause of so much pain! Luke was not only concerned organic brokenness (with sin as a disease) - he also saw patients suffering from despair and doubt and depression and divorce and damnation and degradation and all kinds of human depravity!

Yet as a good doctor - he didn't have the cure for this condition ... the human condition of brokenness known as sin. This was the greatest global pain, but he had no prescription or procedure to remedy it! Sin was a form of suffering that was beyond Luke's diagnostic expertise. Only God, and God alone, could give the orders that would provide the cure. And so that's why Luke became an evangelist -- to remedy the greatest pain of humanity ... the brokenness of sin. He simply communicated God's orders: "CHRIST MUST SUFFER AND MUST RISE AGAIN." Those are the only orders that will cure the condition of human sinfulness.

And St. Luke, a good physician, becomes a good evangelist by giving God's orders ... not his own. And I might say - Luke became a good Lutheran with those same orders from God. For the first order for a diseased world is not anything that can be remedied by our own medical or technological wizardry. Only God can cure the ultimate disease of humanity.

For what if God had not offered the cure for the horrendous pain of sin? Then the result would be eternal death and lostness - from God and each other. Our lost human condition required more than a doctor's scalpal or pulmonary respirator. For those are only temporary fixes. For as commentator Robert Stackel says, "the only treatment that would heal humanity was for God himself to suffer and rise again. For if Christ simply rose from death without suffering first, we would have no forgiveness. And if he simply suffered and died without rising from death, then we would have no hope ... no lasting cure. The Son of God had to suffer and rise from death for our cure from an otherwise incurable disease."

How fantastic that God used a physician to serve as his witness to this greatest of all truths! How great that a physician is the first to say that there is one cure which only God alone can offer: THE RESURRECTION FROM DYING AND DEATH. And the first order given to doctors and all of us IS TO REMEMBER THAT THE ULTIMATE CURE IS GOD'S GIFT. The ultimate cure is not in our neo-natal units ... or our intensive care heroics. God does not want any of us to play his part ... to make claims upon which we cannot deliver. There is a great need for medical intervention and technology in this world. But as physicians and patients -- we must remember that there is a time when "intervention" is NO LONGER THE ORDER ... but rather "surrender into the hands of God." There is a time when a good doctor, like St. Luke, says: this is a case for God alone ... only the suffering and resurrection of Jesus Christ can cure this person.

So our text today makes something very clear about THE DOCTOR'S ORDERS: the first and most important one is out of the hands of the doctor. The first priority in healing is to trust in Jesus Christ as the GREAT PHYSICIAN. What medicine and surgery can't do, Christ can do: HE HEALS US FROM THE GREATEST PAIN OF HUMANITY ... OUR OWN SIN.

Like good orthopedic surgery -- that strengthens rather than weakens our relationship to God. A broken bone that properly heals is normally stronger at the broken place. Likewise, every time God "mends" our relationship broken by sin, the relationship is stronger. We love God more. God transforms the weakness of our human brokenness into the strength of his healing blessedness through Jesus Christ.

So that leads to the second "must" -- the second order from the doctor in today's text: "YOU MUST PREACH THE MESSAGE OF REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS TO ALL PEOPLES."

For several years Dr. Granger Westberg, founder of Wholistic Medicine, has been doing seminars for doctors, nurses, pastors, and other healing professionals. One of the authoritative studies he uses identifies revenge and fear as the major cause of sickness. The medical cases studied reflect a repressed feeling of fear and revenge -- attitudes of anger not expressed in actions.

My unscientific interpretation of Westberg's study is that people are afraid and angry. They are afraid and angry about the truth -- because the truth often results in suffering and many times guilt. They are afraid and angry with commitment -- because they see so many examples of deceit and exploitation ... so many uncommitted people in positions of power and authority. They are afraid and angry about failure -- because they see nice people like themselves being rejected from jobs and the mainstream of society for no justifiable reason (other than the profit motive). They are afraid and angry about their own insecurity -- because success in today's society is totally one-dimensional ... measured only as material abundance. They are even afraid and angry at God -- because they see religion as an institution of indictment. They view God as a sniper of the sinful rather than a Savior of the sickly!

What is Dr. Westberg's prescription? He says the same medical study revealed that the major factor in staying healthy is an outlet for gratitude -- having a time and place to give thanks. Thus, Westberg concludes that the healthiest hour of the week is the one that we are now sharing at this moment. Because worship best offers us the opportunity to resolve conflict and guilt through forgiveness but also to express feelings of gratitude through praising God for his acts of mercy!!

Dr. Westberg and Dr. Luke are saying the same thing! Dr. Luke says, "You must preach the message of repentance and forgiveness." Worship teaches us the remedy for much of our fear and anger: REPENT AND FORGIVE!! The church is God's pharmacy on earth -- it has the God's prescription for pain caused by fear and anger: "repent and forgive." But like any pharmaceutical ... just like any order from the doctor ... if we don't use it, we lose it. THERE IS NO HEALING POWER IF WE DON'T FOLLOW THE ORDERS.

That is illustrated through the story of the young couple about to be married who had a bitter argument. The fight was so fracturing that it left the couple really questioning their commitment. In fact, the woman was so upset she left town to be by herself, without anyone to counsel her or give an outside opinion. The more she reflected on the situation, the more bitter she became!

Meanwhile, her boyfriend reflected on the situation and consulted friends and even his pastor. He soon realized that his anger had been trivial and immature. So he wanted to apologize, but he didn't know where to reach her. Finally, he got an address from her parents, and wrote a beautiful letter, repenting of his anger and confirming his love and trust of her ... requesting above all, her return.

Just before the letter arrived at the hotel, his girlfriend, still harboring her anger, left the hotel for a long drive around the harbor. While driving the windy, coastal highway, distracted by her own angry thoughts, she failed to negotiate a hairpin curve and crashed through a guardrail over a cliff. She never regained consciousness ... and she never heard the Word of reconciliation. She died, physically and relationally full of pain!

How sad that so many people choose to enter their dying moments in pain rather than at peace. How sad that people don't follow THE DOCTOR'S ORDERS: REPENT AND FORGIVE! FULFILL YOUR MINISTRY. Don't just sit there - do something with what you have received. Preach repentance and forgiveness to all peoples.

The good physician, Dr. Luke, gives orders that never fail. First, accept the grace of God - namely, the suffering and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Make that the ultimate source of healing for your life. Second, while life goes on, live every day as a witness of repentance and forgiveness - TURNING BACK TO GOD, AND ALWAYS FORGIVING OTHERS!!!

So finally the third "must" -- the third of Dr. Luke's orders: "You must wait for the power from above to come down." What good, practical, medical advice. In short, don't expect an instant cure! Medical and spiritual cures take time! So expect some waiting time -- regardless of the pain or problem -- before the healing takes place. Healing always takes time. As one doctor in this congregation has often said, "It took a long time for the problem to get there; it's going to take as much time to go away."

Most of you are familiar with the largest, living and created thing on earth -- the giant Sequoia tree in California. It takes years and years for this tree to reflect its full power. And yet it produces seeds so small that it takes 3000 of them to make one once. It takes time to show the fulness of God's power at work in us.

Likewise, for healing. When a 9-month old child is given resurrection instead of physical healing to enjoy many more years on earth -- it takes time for God's healing power to come down and be with us. When we have had five coronary by-passes, it takes time before God's power of renewal can be felt in that heart. When we are dying of cancer, it takes time before we can accept God's power of resurrection as the best treatment program for the future.

But with time, THE DOCTOR'S ORDERS and God's orders PROVIDE THE SAME HEALING RESULTS: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord will award to me on that Day, and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing." You can't lose with Christ as your Greatest Physician!!

AMEN.



ST. MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS FESTIVAL  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
September 29, 1991  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## "IN SEARCH OF ANGELS"

At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered Dan. 12:1-2

As should be evident from today's festival heading - St. Michael and All Angels - I have been IN SEARCH OF ANGELS all week. In 25 years of preaching, I have never had to encounter St. Michael and all the other angels. And Pastor Jeff has been having a picnic all week jibbing me as to whether I would ever find the Angels of my search. Well I have covered many trails this week - three public libraries, several bookstores and several commentaries -- all IN SEARCH OF ANGELS. And then on Friday, God's revelation "on angels" finally came to me in our own church bulletin. I looked at the insert page, and lo and behold, there was the answer to my search: the angels were in the balcony of Hope Lutheran Church last Sunday ... and their names were Bill Opferman, Bill Kinschner, Margaret Hodges and Diane Brooks. To think that I spent all week in theological reference books ... and my SEARCH FOR ANGELS COULD HAVE BEEN SATISFIED RIGHT HERE AT HOPE CHURCH. But lest we laught too long, we will soon find a great deal of truth in this revelation of angels being right here.

Of course, we all get a little laugh when we think about Kinschner and Opferman as angels (first of all, their voices are too deep; furthermore, I've never known an angel who always carries an attache case). I must admit, however, that I found it interesting that Annelle referred to them as "Balcony Angels." We'd all like to believe that we graduated long ago from the three-storied universe in which the concept of angels was created long before any Christian traditions: 1) angels up there; 2) humans around here; and 3) demons down there. But the facts are - the angel is one of those Articles of Faith as unshakeable as our belief in the existence of God. One in every ten popular songs invokes angels in some form or another - from Earth Angel, to teen Angel, to Angels We Have Heard On High. Angels appear on Christmas cards and wedding invitations; they abound on souvenirs, jewelry and religious bric-a-brac; and every museum is packed full of paintings and sculptures of these winged and cherubic figures. Some of us were even so impressed with angels as God's messengers ... that we even named our daughters, Angela.

Yet, ask anyone if he/she really believes in the existence of an angel and suddenly a profound conflict arises between the certitude of faith and the realism of the 20th century. Yet, just a decade ago, a Gallup poll conducted a U.S. survey and found that more than 50% of those questioned answered positively to a belief in angels and demons. It doesn't seem to matter whether opinions come from the scientific community,

from orthodox Christians, or from New Age thinkers - on one level, angels have retained their magical popularity and power; on another level, no one quite believes in them anymore.

So, what do we do with all this ambiguity on St. Michaels and All Angels Day? What can we really say about the angelic landscape that authentically combines reality, myth, fantasy, legend, dreams, and supernatural visions. Like Luther, should we just trash the angelic superstructure with one contemptuous gesture - but then grimly hang onto Satan and his dark hordes as Luther did? Are there really angels that mediate between the sacred realm of the transcendental and the profane realm of this "jungle" world? Well, the four monotheistic religions -- Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam - all answer "yes" to the question. But "yes" has as many meanings as it has affirmations. The affirmation of the angelic is a very personal thing. So in this "Search for Angels," what do we really mean when we say "Yes, they exist & they mediate God's message!"

In looking at the word itself, "angel" comes from a Greek translation of the original Hebrew - "mal-'ahk," meaning the "showdow side of God." Later it simply came to mean messenger. And it's in this definition, MESSENGER, that we finally gain some answers to our search. Within the real world, a messenger does not have essence but ONLY function. Said another way, the significance of angels lies not in who or what they are, but rather in what they do. Or to relate this to scripture: there are 279 references to angels in the Bible, yet not one of them explains who or what angels are! They are never defined in scripture; they just carry out evangelistic functions: they are the functionaries of good news.

Going somewhat further, a familiar modern usage of "angel" is the most vivid clue to the Bible's real meaning. Florence Nightengale, and uncounted others like her, are often called "angels of mercy." When we begin to think of "angel" as a "mediator of mercy," then we finally see the common theme that emerges in the Bible. Whether its the book of Daniel or Revelation - we encounter stories of God's people under persecution and perverse powers. These are the moments when God's people are in need of a messenger, a mediator who will bring hope and promise for better days. Is it any wonder that almost all of the 279 angelic verses are passages in which God is responding to human need with mercy - mediating help & hope. What is an angel? An angel is God's mighty love breaking through into our human experiences and conflicts.

Have you ever had such an experience ... where God's love broke through to give you reassurance, comfort, relief, or the promise of hope? Then you know what it's like to be in the company of angels. That is the mission of St. Michael and all angels: TO BREAK THROUGH INTO HUMAN EXPERIENCE, ESP. HUMAN PAIN AND PERSECUTION, AND OFFER THE MIGHTY LOVE, MERCY & PEACE OF GOD!

For me, those encounters with angels have never been of the funny-looking variety -- effeminate figures in long white night gowns, with Revlon hair-styles, playing harps and fluttering around on fluffy-feathered wings. But I have encountered hundreds and hundreds of St. Michaels in my visits to hospitals, nursing homes, funeral homes, family homes, church sanctuaries, fellowship halls, living rooms, family rooms, kitchens, offices, and a host of many other places. Isn't it amazing - most of us have had millions of encounters with such mediators of mercy. And yet - when I went to Thackeries earlier this week ... there was only this book on Angels, yet there were hundreds of books in the next section on Occult and Satanism. Unfortunately -- too many of us have just sung about "Angels We Have Heard On High" ... we haven't sung enough about the "Angels We Have Touched On Earth" ... or who have touched us. Because Daniel and Revelation do not have a monopoly on persecution and pain; those realities are part of my experience and your experience every day ... and we desperately need St. Michael and all the other angels in 1991 just as they were needed in earlier centuries.

You may wondering yet - what am I really saying? Have you listened to anyone in pain, conflict or suffering lately? I can't make it through a week without being besieged by a multitude of experiences of pain and suffering. Not only the big ones - the deaths, the divorces, the depressions, the dysfunctionals of life. I'm just talking about normal folks ... whom you would think have it all together ... who paint this picture that everything is always coming up roses. This week I spent a little over an hour with one such family. In that sixty minutes, I heard more unresolved persecution, more pain, more distress, more need for the mighty love of God than I ever imagined was a possibility for that family. For one reason or another - that was the moment of truth - the time the story was finally told. And that was also the moment that God called me to be an angel, to be his messenger who would help fight the demonic dragons that had poisoned that family and can poison all our families. For nearly an hour, I had the gracious opportunity to be a mediator of understanding and loving forgiveness. God gives you that same opportunity -- day after day after day. I sincerely hope that we are not "angels in disguise." I hope we offer the presence of the greatest angel ever known ... the resurrected Christ - the one who appeared many times after his resurrection to his followers to assure them that God's message of forgiving love and mercy and hope were very much alive.

St. Michael is hardly the only angel story of the Bible. There are hundreds of "angel stories" in scripture -- the angels are just called by different names. Do you remember the story of the "man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and left him half dead. ... Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place, he passed by on the other side. ... But

a Samaritan came to where he was; and he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds ... and brought him to an inn." We have traditionally called that story the parable of the Good Samaritan. But in reality, it's just another GOOD ANGEL STORY! The samaritan was simply a messenger - a mediator of mercy!

There are many other good angel stories to which you should become more familiar. On Tuesdays, there's a gang called Lunches with Luther that gathers in Larson Hall; that group of 30 to 35 people has become an angelic host for one another -- because they have made their mission one of supporting one another with the mighty love of God. I'm sure Pastor Silleck could say the same for Crossways ... or Diane Kalb for WELCA ... or Lois Brigham for the Guild ... or Annelle for the choir. In fact, Annelle has already told us about four angels in the choir; I'm confident she has a whole choir of angels.

Thank God - he has given us the Festival of St. Michael and All Angels -- a day to reflect upon those moments in which his love has prevailed against the dragons and demons that have invaded this world with greed and evil. Thank God - we have the opportunity to gather round his table and become part of the angelic host where his love breaks through human conflict and offers everlasting peace. Yes, whenever we experience his love and mercy prevailing against the demonic selfishness of this world we know for certain that we have been in the company of angels. And in those moments - as he did for St. Michael and All Other Angels -- God assures us that HIS ANGELS WILL PREVAIL - WE WILL NOT BE DEFEATED - WE WILL WIN THE VICTORY OF MERCY OVER MADNESS ... OF LIFE OVER DEATH. AMEN.

Pentecost XIX  
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo  
September 28, 1997  
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

## **“WATCH OUT FOR STUMBLING BLOCKS!”**

*John said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.’ But Jesus said, ‘Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. ... If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.’ Mark 9:38-40;42*

There’s a story of a successful banker whose houseboat was sinking off the Florida coast. He radioed for help. The Coast Guard picked up his SOS and radioed back: “We’re on our way--What is your position?” We repeat: “What is your position?” The banker replied: “I’m the Executive Vice President of First National Bank.”

Sounds incredible, doesn’t it? In the midst of desparation & deep trouble -- this banker was still thinking of his corporate title--his official label--his official status as a banking officer. We sometimes wonder why there is so much pain hardship, & despair in the world. One of the answers is vividly seen in this story: TOO MANY PEOPLE ARE TOO CONCERNED ABOUT ONLY THEIR OFFICIAL LABELS OR JOB DESCRIPTIONS. We too often lose sight of the real needs & dilemmas because we’re using all our energy including or excluding ourselves or someone else because they don’t meet OUR criteria.

Such was the case in today’s gospel. There were a lot of sick people giving SOS calls in Jesus’ culture. Obviously, sickness in that day meant you were possessed by a demon. And as the text says - some unofficial minister was casting out demons in Jesus name--but he hadn’t been officially authorized to do so by John and the other “official” disciples. So John says to Jesus: “Stop him ... because he is not following us.” The minister didn’t have John’s pedigree ... he didn’t have the proper ordination credentials ... he obviously wasn’t “a Lutheran,” so he had no authority to cast out demons. But Jesus quickly answered, “Do not stop him -- for whoever is not against us is for us!”

Imagine how different church history would be today if Christians over the centuries had abided by this one assertion of Jesus: “He/she who is not against us is for us!” Had Christianity long lived by this principle -- there never would have been any bloody Crusades or Inquisition ... nor the divisive Reformation ... nor the frustrating & fracturing denomination feuds that have continued right up to our recent national assembly in Philadelphia. When will we learn that BEARING THE NAME of Christ transcends any label or job description or denomination we have created by our own structures or theological talk.

John and the other disciples with him were creating STUMBLING BLOCKS for new believers. So our gospel today gives a warning -- not to outsiders--those without any official Christian designation. It is clearly a warning to us -- the

insiders -- the ones who have already become followers. And the warning says - **- DO NOT CREATE STUMBLING BLOCKS** for any little ones still growing in the faith. It defines two ways that insiders create stumbling blocks for little ones or outsiders. First, we demand that everyone else must first act, dress, think, pray, sing, praise, prance, confess, converse and look like us before they can officially do anything in the Name of Jesus Christ! In short, too often devout Christians operate by the standard of exclusivity rather than inclusivity. Jesus operated by the power of inclusivity--anyone who did the Father's will in His name was included as a believer. When we operate by the standard of exclusivity -- we demand that others must first be authorized by us before they can be about God's business. And with this principle, the Christian Church becomes nothing more than another competitive arena in the world where one group is trying to take dominance and power over another group.

My Christian friends -- is it any wonder that the Church has too often "stumbled" along for all these centuries. Thanks be to God - Glenwood Church and its present Search Committee has established that a major priority of this congregation's ministry and its new pastor will be God's POWER OF INCLUSIVITY -- that all will be welcomed and be uplifted as official ministers who do God's will in the name of Jesus, regardless of race, background or status.

But insiders are also warned in this text about another "stumbling block" they can pose "for the little ones." In short, this stumbling block is when insiders use their mouths or hands or feet or eyes or any part of themselves to do something which is contrary to the Father's will or business: namely, something that discredits or damages the name of Christ. In order to make a point here, Jesus uses hyperbole to show how serious such stumbling blocks can be. So he says, "if your hand has been used abusively rather than for its purpose as a Godlike instrument of support -- then cut it off." Obviously, Jesus did not mean to be taken literally here. But he wanted it clearly understood that our actions as Christians either fortify or fracture others in the faith.

For instance, the recent actions of a local pastor exposing himself on a public highway cannot rightfully or faithfully be condoned "as an authentic evangelistic appeal by God." God spiritual business is not "Public Sexual Exposure"-- that's not his method for winning converts to the faith--even though the people of Cornerstone Church (who like to think of themselves as Bible reading folks) seem to be agreeing with this method ... or at least I've heard no one indicate that their pastor did anything opposed to God's business. But God simply says there are some actions that can only be offensive to the little ones who are seeking to become more mature Christians.

In short, Jesus is saying that once you and I become identified as His followers we must lead a more disciplined life with our mouths, our hands, our feet, and anything else we show in the public arena. That is no easy challenge for any of us -- especially in our culture which promotes total freedom & anything goes. For instance, which one of us has never told an "off color" story and then

regretted it because it could have harmed someone else's understanding of the faith?? Every pastor including Peter Martyn knows his fair share of "Off Color" stories -- but God calls each of us to be very careful not to share them where they could harm the faith of little ones.

The same is true for any other cheap talk or actions we might be tempted to use in our fellowship. Certainly, God will forgive our vulgarity, but he does not want it to become a stumbling block for another's faith or formation as a Christian. And that's why gossip & vulgarity & bigotry and any other cheap talk (including swearing) is frightfully dangerous --NOT ONLY can it do great harm to others -- BUT IT CAN BE IDENTIFIED AS the Way that GOD SPEAKS or ACTSs. So, when someone does it ... or exploits others with eyes or hands or mouth or whatever else that might do harm to the person or the faith -- Jesus says: "that person should be thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck." Obviously - he doesn't mean literally thrown into the sea ... but he is saying such persons & such behavior are to be excluded from Christian fellowship.

So, let it never be said that Jesus was soft on insiders and hard on outsiders. Quites to the contrary --he's far more demanding on "insiders" -- those who have claimed to be devout followers. He demands that we get beyond our superficial labels and be about his Father's business ... rather than making our business and status the essence of faith. And he also demands that we only do those things publicly with our hands and feet and mouths and eyes which will bring honor and integrity to the God's name and his household.

So the next time you hear someone call or ask for help -- don't be like the banker who gives his title or denomination! Be a real Christian -- offer a helping hand, a loving heart, a supportive look, and maybe even a hug & smile from the Lord After all, that's the proper use of our hands, our hearts, our mouths & our feet.  
AMEN.

Pentecost XIX  
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo  
October 6, 1996  
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

## **WANTED: A GOOD RETURN FOR ALL & FROM ALL!**

*Jesus quotes the 118th Psalm saying: "Have you never read in scriptures, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes!'" Matt. 21:42*

Dear members and friends, this has been a big week of Good Investments at Glenwood. Literally, several hundred members & friends made a tremendous investment in the rummage sale -- either by bringing stuff, sorting stuff, buying stuff, or selling stuff. We owe a great debt of gratitude to Dorothy Harris and her helpers!! (Clap!) But not only rummage sales -- it has been a week prayer-filled with Peanut Butter!! Not one of us in this room has lived his/her life without ample peanut butter. In my 54 years, I cannot remember a day without peanut butter in the cupboard; and if gone, we went out and got some more!! Last Sunday Burt Sigley appealed to our sense of faithfulness: he quoted our Vision Statement which says *"that we will make Christ known as a source of hope & healing to our neighborhood."* In appealing to us, Burt made us aware that the cupboards of FYN at LSS and at Focus are empty!! Today was to be a day to return to the hungry what God has given us in great measure: PEANUT BUTTER!

Yes, every one of us in this room is very concerned about "the kind of RETURN we get on our INVESTMENTS. Regardless of whether it's the stock market, or a market basket program for the poor, or our jobs ... when we put forth a significant effort, WE EXPECT A GOOD RETURN! As you heard from Pastor Lynn Miller two weeks ago, that was also our experience recently with the LEARNING CLUB. Our new strategy no longer seeks government support, but individual & congregational INVESTOR support-- people who believe in the importance of education for everyone and are willing to put their money where they often put their mouths! In July, Lynn & I identified 30 individual INVESTORS for the program. As of yesterday's Board meeting, 21 of those 30 have become INVESTORS. That's a 66% return! Don't we wish all of God's programs got that kind of support. Well, be assured, Glenwood Church will become one of those INVESTORS -- Pastor Akerman's "pennies for the Learning Club" has already yielded over \$450 with LB match); that means only \$50 and Glenwood will be an INVESTOR congregation! (myself)

So, when it comes to rummage sales, Peanut Butter and the LEARNING CLUB®--there's good news to report today!! Unfortunately, that was not the case for Isaiah & Jesus several thousand years ago. Much as God says to Glenwood today, he said to Israel then: *"I am going to bless you beyond your imagination; I am going to give you a fantastically fruitful vineyard. And from this vineyard, I want you to be the stewards to bless others. You will be my instrument to restore harmony and wholeness and beauty back into creation."* **Do we get it?!?** I am making a covenant with you: I will do this and this and this; and I will



also do that and that and that! I will provide you with everything you need to bless yourselves and the world. Now all I ask is that you give me A GOOD RETURN on my investment. Do we get it!?!?

And what did God learn from Isaiah & Matthew?? Did he get a 66% return?? Did he get joyous and benevolent responses from his people Israel or Glenwood?? Did his stewards seek to offer justice and righteousness to those less fortunate?? What kind of song were God's servants singing in the vineyard? Was it a song of "Praise & Thanksgiving?" Or was it the Burger King song, "I'LL HAVE IT MY WAY!!" Well, we all know, don't we?!? Instead of returning a fruitful harvest, the tenants acted with violence, greed and rebellion! We're told by Isaiah that God's return was "wild grapes." Do you know about "wild grapes" in Hebrew? "Wild grapes" meant your teeth would rot and you would vomit violently and constantly, making you repulsive to everyone around you. So, God gave his people a grand vineyard with a lot more than peanut butter; and God's people (vineyard) yielded "wild grapes" -- they treated God and his messengers with violence and rebellion.

So, that was thousands of years ago. Does this Song & Parable have any application right now?!? Does God always get the GOOD RETURN that he has received from a rummage sale, Peanut Butter and the Learning Club? We all know the answer: VERY RARELY! Some say it's easy to give back to God what he has first given; I beg to differ! I have never seen any Christian who finds RETURNING GOD'S INVESTMENT EASY!! In fact, quite to the contrary like Isaiah, sometimes the church & Christians are the most abominable example of God's goodness & generosity. I wish I had an hour or two to defend that statement; regrettably, I only have 15 minutes. And that alone illustrates for you the value that people give to God's Word today--they compare it and its messengers to the brief sound bites they hear daily on TV. God's Word has become just another example of TV noise. But enough "sour grapes" from Peter Martyn--let's focus on God's desire for A GOOD RETURN.

What can we go home with from this parable? First, like all parables, this gives us one of God's checklists for living faithfully! The first question asked here is: are you treating the vineyard as an owner or steward? God knows us too well. When he blesses us, we often see ourselves as owners rather than managers (stewards) of His resources. Tell me good friends, what is the greatest tribulation today inside and outside of the church?? TERF BATTLES! And why do we fight battles over terf as denominations, as races, as businesses, as parents & children, as even sports' enthusiasts?? BECAUSE WE HAVE FORGOTTEN THAT WE ARE STEWARDS, NOT OWNERS! This coming week -- pray about becoming a GOOD STEWARD--because then God's always gets a GOOD RETURN!

Secondly, this parable has God asking each of us: "*Have I given you adequate resources?? Are you grateful for your blessings??*" Is there anyone here today who will not have adequate meals/shelter this coming week?? (See me!) Is

there anyone here who feels that he/she must kill or steal from others in order to feel adequately cared for this coming week?? Is there anyone here who really feels that God has cheated you of mercy, support and forgiveness??? If we have answered, "NO" to these--then why do we act so often like the tenants in Jesus' parable??? Why do we seem so threatened, so insecure, so tempted to hurt others just so that we can keep more for ourselves?!? This coming week our parable advises us to show a greater TRUST in what God has given!! God will provide what is necessary--count on it! That won't mean luxury for everybody! In fact, it will not be easy for many of us--some of us will have it tougher than others!! But God says he will be with us to provide the necessities. And once provided, all He asks is: GIVE A GOOD RETURN--Be fair and right to others, as he has been fair and right to us!!

Third and last, the parable says there will be judgment for the rebellious ones -- that God will punish the wicked and give His vineyard to others. So the question is: who are the rebellious ones?? Are they the Jews? Or the Roman Catholics? Or the Muslims? Or the poor & disadvantaged? Obviously, the rebellious ones are you and me ... and all the rest: every person who is sinful has pushed God out of the picture!! So what does this word of "judgment" really mean? It means that God never forces anyone to be faithful!! We can choose Him ... or we can choose our own way! Said in theological terms, we can choose Hell or we can choose Heaven! These terms don't mean a "firey pit" or a "flowered paradise." God has given us the freedom to choose Him as our Savior (that's heaven) ... or to reject Him as just another Serpent (that's hell). Do we view God as one who rescues us from all that is evil; or do we just view Him as another "pain in the butt" -- another of life's demands??

Maybe a classic Indian story best illustrates how we often confuse God's grace with the world's "damning" spirit. The story is the Indian parable of the mongoose. A certain Indian family had a pet mongoose. It was beloved by the family and ate meals with them and even slept with the children at night. One day in the heat of the summer, the mother placed her youngest baby outdoors under a tree while she labored inside the hut.

Suddenly, she noticed the mongoose creeping toward his accustomed water bowl. The sleek rodent was covered with dust and had bloody-stained jaws. In that instant, the mother guessed that their mongoose had attacked her sleeping baby. She snatched a heavy rice-pounder and smashed the head of the mongoose. Rushing outdoors, she found her baby peacefully asleep--and beside the child was the body of a large cobra which the mongoose had killed.

This mother had killed the SAVIOR, NOT THE SERPENT, of her child. Somehow, like that mother, we keep confusing God's goodness with the world's rebellion: we confuse the Savior with the Serpent. And amazingly, unlike the parable in which Matthew always has Jesus using hyperbole to get our attention, God keeps on sending messengers back to us EVEN AFTER WE HAVE KILLED THE SAVIOR!! Most good investment analysts would say that's the dumbest thing God could ever do!! They would say, "If those

**dummies don't see God's good investment, let them go to hell!!" Well, thankfully, God's a much better investment broker!!**

**Today, throughout the world, God keeps on foolishly reminding us that his cornerstone has not been destroyed!! It was raised again on the third day!! But that cornerstone has come into this world not only to lift us up, but also to break us down!! Jesus Christ not only graciously forgives, he also asks us out of confidence in that forgiveness **TO REPENT FOR OUR REBELLION--IN SHORT, TO CHANGE OUR GREEDY WAYS!!****

**In something as simple as bread and wine, God breaks down the walls of division and idolatry that have caused so much violence and bloodshed in our world. In a mean called Holy Communion, God seeks to empower us to become **NEW AGAIN -- to become stewards of ONLY ONE TERF ... his gracious terf ... his vineyard ... where peace & patience & kindness & gentleness & joy & love & forgiveness become the ruling powers. There are no social or racial or status barriers on God's terf. On this terf, God's goodness & power crushes our inflated egos and our obsession with greed. On His terf, He disposes of any human garbage where we have messed around as OWNERS RATHER THAN STEWARDS of his vineyard. And just so that we don't forget -- while we're managing his terf, he taps us on the shoulder and says: "*Remember, you don't own it ... give me a GOOD RETURN on my investment ... for all and from all! And that's offering a lot more than a jar of peanut butter!!*"****

**AMEN.**