

PENTECOST XVI
Church of the Master - Troy
September 22, 1974

"CALCULATE THE COST"

"No one who does not carry his cross and come with me can be a disciple of mine. Would any of you think of building a tower without first sitting down and calculating the cost, to see whether he could afford to finish it?"

Luke 14:27-28

We've all known people who commit themselves to causes that demand no less than absolute loyalty. For some the high calling of patriotism is supreme. For others a reverent religious or denominational loyalty claims devotion. A young follower of the new sect, the Unification Church, recently said of their leader, Sun Myung Moon: "I love him and trust him so much I would give my life for him." Rennie Davis, one of the notorious "Chicago 7" has committed himself to the young, 16 yr old Guru Maharai Ji about whom he said: "I'd crawl half way around the world just to kiss his big toe."

Obviously, such unquestioning loyalty has its dangers. Jack Shea, a Dallas oil executive ten years ago, wrote of the kind of loyalties the company expected of him. In the aftermath of Pres. Kennedy's assassination, Mr. Shea authored an article in which he engaged in considerable soul searching in a national magazine.

His company was incensed, and asked him to sign a statement which said: "I agree never to comment publicly without formally clearing each word in advance and in writing."

Mr. Shea later stated: "The issue was not what I said, but whether I could say anything at all." He refused that understanding of loyalty and resigned saying: "I cannot sign away my citizenship for the company payroll."

Mr Shea is no stranger to most of us. You and I may never have been silenced in the same way that he was, but we can identify with his struggle of discipleship. He had to calculate the cost - he had to do a cost analysis on what he valued most in life. Where would he put his priority commitment -- with the company investments, or with the integrity of his relationship to God and his fellow citizens?

His dilemma of discipleship was a ^{NO EASY} practical ^{UN-} ^{EASY} one. Jesus presents us with the same practical circumstances in today's gospel. He asks us to do a cost analysis of our discipleship. He simply wants us to assess the costs and risks involved in being a Christian disciple. He asks us: How intent are you upon finishing this task I've given you during your lifetime?

And so he says: Think about it -- think hard before you take the leap of faith. Know what you're getting into -- it's not simply a Sunday joy-ride.

I like the text because it lends itself well to a parallel than many of us face daily. In other words, this text has a good parable connection to life around Metro Detroit. Namely, Detroit industry demands a discipleship very similar to that of Christ himself. It's almost as if industry was reading the Bible when job descriptions were being written.

Whether male or female, employee or spouse of employee, a very familiar topic in these parts is the cost analysis of company discipleship. In short, the terms of company discipleship beautifully illustrate Christian discipleship.

First, there's self-sacrifice. What employee or spouse does not know the meaning of this? It means long hours, much fatigue, and a good deal of family separation. . . sometimes even creating conflicts.

And Jesus comes along saying that we must all bear the cross - namely, a true disciple does not

accept God's gift of grace without a response of self-sacrifice. So Jesus says - CALCULATE THIS COST - before you blindly follow me, be aware that it will involve a sacrifice of time, talent, and gifts.

Then there's the corporate requirement of follow-through. If you make a promise, you'd better follow-through. A good, practical admonition.

Here again we are shown by ^{a secular comparison} ~~our everyday~~ pattern a parallel of Christian discipleship. Jesus said: Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and not do what I tell you?" . . . God has followed through for us - he expects a similar response. When we pray - "thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" -- God would like us to deliver on earth! When we pray, "forgive us, as we forgive those who trespass against us," we are making a prayerful promise that requires follow-through!

Again, the company disciple and spouse know the meaning of obedience and trust essential for discipleship. Such discipleship means that you function according to the authority patterns established.

And so for Christian discipleship - obedience and trust are as old as faith itself. God has entrusted us with a gift of love -- he expects an obedient response to that trust. That response is often costly -- it pulls us into relationships with persons beyond the comfortable open fields of this area. And so Jesus says: CALCULATE THE COST -- can you fulfill God's trust with all mankind - or only people who fit your classification of acceptability?

I hope these points illustrate how we daily calculate the cost of our secular discipleship. And even with the tremendous sacrifices and personal cost factors of this discipleship -- the commitment to company ~~discipleship~~ continues. And that's o.k. - and it's necessary.

But the point of today's text is simply - where does our Christian commitment fit into the pecking order? When Jesus uses the word "hate" the Greek meaning is "second place." He could include company as well as family members in this list - for Christian discipleship expects all of life possessions to take second place.

First place is solely for love - namely, the grace of God. And although grace (God's love) is free, it is not cheap. It is a gift, therefore, it cannot be bargained for at a cut-rate or second-class price. It is ample, but it will not be stretched over any person who rejects this way of living. The cross was costly. It cost God LIFE to redeem us. It costs us LIFE to respond as disciples.

We all want to believe that we've sufficiently CALCULATED THE COST of discipleship. We all want to believe that we've said "yes" to Christ -- that we've sacrificed, followed-through, and trusted in Christ's way.

Obviously,
~~And~~ each of REALLY knows whether we've done this. Yes, the decision is ours as to where we'll place our priorities in life. Many of our friends have chosen secular discipleships as their top priority. For such a commitment, there will be rewards - the rewards of status, prestige, wealth and maybe even popularity.

Christian discipleship ALLOWS for all of these, BUT THEY ARE NOT THE AIM OR GOAL OF THE CHRISTIAN'S COMMITMENT. Status, prestige, popularity and wealth may all come to a Christian disciple, but his priority commitment does not focus on these.

*That's the focus of
your commitment.*
He receives a costly gift of love, and he offers the same. And the satisfaction he receives for this offering is one thing - INTEGRITY. That is the aim - the fringe benefit - and the reward for a committed Christian life - INTEGRITY. Integrity - an integrated relationship with God, with his people, and with his creation. . . the AIM and the PAY OFF for a committed Christian.

Jesus says: Calculate the cost by knowing the destination and getting there with the costly love of God. The journey will require sacrifice - it will not be easy. But just know that the destination is an integration with the Father -- a union, a oneness with God and all who reflect his likeness in Christ.

The widow of slain civil rights leader, Medgar Evers, once wrote what it was like to live under the constant threat of death. She said: "In a funny way, the constant threat of death made life richer and more meaningful -- it made us more aware of each other, and it brought us closer together. When he left in the morning, I never knew if I would see him again. We never parted in anger because we couldn't afford it."

What a profound summary statement of Christian discipleship - we never parted in anger because we couldn't afford it.

My friends, we can't afford to leave here as anything but disciples committed to loving and forgiving one another. And we can't afford to leave each other daily without that love and forgiveness of God.

Why? Because God has called us first and foremost to be Christian disciples, not secular disciples. Because today may be the last chance we have to share his love with one another. And God calls us TO BEGIN and END our lives with integrity -- integrated with his love.

~~So let us always FINISH our Christian discipleship FIRST - before we get on with the world's demands and commitments. It's worth the cost!~~

^{Amen}
*We can afford to
let us continue to
finish the integration which
God has begun —*

PENTECOST XVI

Luth. Church of the Master

September 7, 1975

"THE HIGHEST AUTHORITY"

Text: Romans 13:1-10

After reading this 13th chapter of Romans, is there any doubt in anyone's mind how all those German Lutherans allowed Hitler to exterminate millions of Jews. (REREAD)

Could Paul have possibly been serious that this is God's desire for men when under the regime of a dictator? What does a conscientious Christian in Russia, China, Poland, Yugoslavia -- what does such a Christian do with Romans 13?

Or let's bring it closer to home. What does an American Christian do when his corporate boss - his governing authority - asks him to prostitute himself by fudging corporate figures ?

What should a Christian do when his superiors preach righteousness but live in total disobedience to what he preaches? Can we be subject to - can we honor - can we respect such an authority?

How is a child, raised in a Christian home, supposed to respond when his parents force him to violate laws which are designed for integration? Which authority is the child to obey - his parents or the governing authorities?

What would Paul say about the laborer, the teacher, the civil servant who goes on strike IN DIRECT violation of his/her governing authorities?

Are we to take Paul seriously in Romans 13 the way German Lutherans took him during the Hitler regime - or is Paul just showing another quirk in his personality when he proclaims

that we are to be subject to our governing authorities??

Well - Paul is dead serious. Paul believed that governing authorities, whether Christians or not, were ordained by God to fulfill his law - to maintain order and justice in society. For it is only through such orderliness that man can be sustained, and that a society can continue to serve its people.

Paul here makes a very strong case because civil disobedience was rampant at this time. In his commentary, Barclay states, "the Jews were notoriously rebellious. Palestine, and esp. Gallilee, was constantly seething with insurrection. Above all there were the Zealots; they were convinced there was no king for the Jews but God; and that no tribute was to be paid to anyone except God."

"They believed God would not be helping unless they embarked on violent action to help themselves. They were sworn and pledged to a career of murder and violence - their aim was to make any civil government impossible!"

So we see, the Zealots and many others felt that because they were the chosen people they were subject only to God AND NO ONE ELSE.

So Paul says - NO WAY! God has instituted authorities to accomplish his purposes. Implied, of course, was that Paul believed that these authorities had to be carrying out the intent of God's law. That is why he says - pay respect to whom respect is due - pay honor to whom honor is due. Paul was not suggesting that CHRISTIANS were to be subject to CORRUPT AUTHORITIES.

It should be obvious that we have had our own forms of zealotry in this day. Which one of us can't remember the left-wing radicalism of the 60's -- people taking authority into their own hands - often resulting in needless bloodshed.

It is this love which God offers to us continually through word and sacrament. He invites us to receive that love NOW, so that we will share it FOREVER.

What a fantastic offering to receive - the authority to love as he first loved us. That we can be totally subject to - because his love can be trusted.

AMEN

Likewise, there is the same problem with the radical right-wing vigilante groups like the KU KLUX KLAN. Today, even respectable people are forming vigilante groups - esp. in regard to the bussing issue. Obviously, all of this is done in the name of SELF-INTEREST surely not in the name of Christ.

But the authority breakdown today is not only related to issues of race, war, labor or government. It has even penetrated the roots of the family. Everyone today has gotten caught up in giving himself/herself **SELF-APPOINTED RIGHTS - SELF-APPOINTED AUTHORITY** -- thereby creating a society, a family where we think we are subject to no one.

Yes, Paul was not alone in his day. There was a need to remind Christians that God had instituted authorities for the good of all. It is important that we remember that today as well - whether the authority be our parents or the president.

But we also know that Paul was not calling for BLIND subjection - how then are we to know which authorities deserve our allegiance? Paul says "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law."

That is the HIGHEST AUTHORITY. The Christian offers UNCOMPROMISING LOYALTY to those authorities who live by the HIGHEST AUTHORITY - the love of God. And what is that love like:

It is patient and kind - it is not jealous or boastful - it is not arrogant or rude - it does not insist on its own way - it is not irritable or resentful - it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. This love never ends.

PENTECOST XVI
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
Sept. 26, 1976

"OPEN YOUR EARS"

"Then looking up to heaven, he sighed, and said to him, Ephphatha, which means, 'Be opened.'" Mark 7:34

How often do you and I think about hearing as a miracle?? I'm not talking about the miracle that Jesus performed, I'm simply talking about hearing as a miracle.

Yes, for most of us hearing is something we take for granted. Very possibly that's why the gospel writers included so many miracle stories -- because we take hearing, and seeing, and even sometimes our health for granted.

Obviously - Mark had more than just this reason in mind for telling this story. His main purpose was to illustrate that Jesus had been given the power to perform the miraculous. This was not a power given to others -- it was Jesus, and he alone, who had **this** gift from God.

That's Mark's essential point. Jesus' miracles were reported in order to confirm that Jesus was God incarnate. They were not reported in order to have modern man prove or disprove them. Their intent was to show God's glory in Jesus, and him alone. So, we either believe them, or we don't. It so happens that I do.

So it is that we give thanks to God for glorifying Jesus in this way.

But can anything more be said about this gospel story? Yes, and no. Nothing more needs to be said about the miracle itself. That's a fact of faith.

But considerably more can and should be said about the gift given in that miracle. Namely-- the gift of hearing and communication.

How often have we thought about God's grace

manifested ^{is} the ability to hear. That's right-- one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is the ability to hear and respond to other people. In some places today lots of emphasis is being given to the gift of tongues -- I personally think a lot more emphasis should be given to the gift of ears.

Imagine life -- the life of this man in the story before he came to Jesus. Imagine the limited perception one would have in the world. Imagine the loneliness of only seeing and not hearing.

I remember so well from my childhood a boy at my grade school who was classified "DEAF & DUMB." I'm certain he grew up to be one of the most handsome men in Oshkosh -- but he also grew up with the stigma of rejection and ridicule. It hurts to remember how we often used to poke fun at him.

So just imagine what it must have been like to hear Jesus say - "OPEN YOUR EARS." What a shocking yet magnificent experience that must have been for this man.

And then we think about ourselves -- almost all of us have been graced with good hearing. What a tremendous unearned gift we have been given. How sad that we take it for granted. But even more sad -- as Jesus so often said, we have ears , yet so often do not hear.

Yes - not only have we been blessed with hearing -- but we have EVEN HEARD THE WORD -- we have been opened up to the ultimate meaning of life -- God and his way in Jesus Christ.

That's the juicy core of application in this story. We not only have been given the gift of hearing -- but we've also been OPENED UP to the communication of God. What greater gift could humankind be given!?! We have heard the Word.

And that word is "OPEN UP!" That's what God is

saying to us right now. Open up! Strip out the impediments! Tear down the barriers! Bridge over the gaps! Open up - that's what God is still miraculously saying -- let the channels of communication begin and continue to operate ~~ohne~~ again.

God is saying through Jesus to us "EPHPHATHA" ... open up ... Open your ears TO THE FATHER AND TO EACH OTHER.

Yes - that's the message of this gospel. He who is Christ's . . . is open . . . open to God . . . and open to his fellow humanity.

"Open to God." What does that mean for you and me. Do we take time to really hear God. What are my prayers and yours like. How much of our PRAYER-TIME is used for broadcasting -- and how much of that prayer-time is used for listening??

So often we recite some familiar words, throw in some blessings, add a few thank yous and petitions, and then immediately signal God that the broadcast is all over -- amen, over and out.

BUT Ephphatha -- open up -- listen to the word of acceptance and forgiveness that God offers. That's the miracle that each of us has been given in addition to hearing.

God's people are OPEN PEOPLE -- listening to God and to each other without limitation -- without judgment -- without contempt.

Yes - most of us have good hearing -- but too many of us listen ONLY to what we want to hear. Yes -- how often we use our ears to block out the hurts and cries of others.

Today is a new day to hear the word EPHPHATHA -- open up. I'm certain that's a hard word to hear. Even harder today, because it must compete with the stereo, the T.V. and the debate rhetoric of '76. And all this noise causes us to feel

like closing up rather than opening up.

I pray, dear friends, that God's word, Ephaphatha, might have a new beginning in our lives today -- and each day.

We have been given ears to hear -- and I can only believe that we have heard that he loves us and desires us to share that acceptance with one another. That love calls for us to take the time to hear one another -- to hear our cries, our requests for recognition, our bids for attention, even our silent prayers that someone will help find some answers to life's deepest troubles and questions.

Yes-- Be opened - to God and to each other, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

AMEN

HOLY CROSS DAY (Pentecost 16)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
September 14, 1980

"HAS THE PRICE GONE UP?"

"The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." I Cor. 1:18

"If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also:"
John 12:26

To be alive in 1980 is to be aware that we live in a world of ~~rising~~ prices. Only the comatose these days are unaware of inflation and ever-rising costs of living.

We, who not long ago prided ourselves as we pulled up to the 25¢ per gallon gas pump, now ~~graphically~~ know the real cost of energy. We who are addicted to our morning coffee pots now think twice before we plug in the second pot. We who have long believed that the American Dream is owning that castle we call home now realize this vision is fast becoming an Impossible Dream for many young Americans.

~~cut~~ Americans today, like maybe never before, have begun to tighten their belts and look more realistically at their needs. And in some ways these inflationary times may be a good thing for all of us -- because we may more realistically look at the limitations of our basic resources... and possibly not take them for granted as we have for the past quarter century, ~~and many other~~

But amidst ~~these~~ ~~inflationary~~ signs, there is still one area of our lives where the price has NOT gone up. This price has remained the same for nearly 2000 years. Inflation, energy crises, world wars, international trade agreements, ... none of these has affected the price of the greatest gift ever given -- the life and death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary.

The price that God paid

2000 years ago was just as high then as it is today. There is no higher price to pay than the price of life itself. And the life sacrificed for us on Golgatha is just as valuable for us today as it was for those who first received it in 30AD.

Thanks be to God that he has paid the ultimate price once and for all. Yes thanks be to God that the cross was and still is God's plan against stagnation, inflation, and all the other human enterprises which threaten to crush civilization. God's plan is a full commitment to us no matter how bad we've blown it. God even gives up his life in order that we might know we are always of great value to him. God does not merely watch over us, but even gets himself involved with us to the point of his own death.

On this Holy Cross Sunday, God reminds us that our Christian roots are tied to his price tag on the cross. He reminds us that the price of being a Christian has NOT gone up -- it's the same today as it was 2000 years ago -- it's the price of obediently loving and sacrificing for others.

Obviously - that price has never been easy to pay - even though it hasn't gone up with inflation. This is surely illustrated in many ways. For instance, there's a story of a professor who was asked if a certain young man had once been his student. He responded: "I remember that the young man ~~had attended my lectures, but he was not one of my students.~~ He was enrolled in my course, and he was present in class for most of my lectures -- but he was not willing to pay the price of scholarship and devotion in order for me to consider him a real student."

Followers of Christ have often been much like that student -- we have occupied our pews, we have listened to the sermons, but we have too often been unwilling to pay the price of discipleship. Or as one author has put it, the Christian marathon has an army of people at the starting blocks, but only a handful of runners at the finish line. The greatest malady that has forever plagued the mission of Christ ~~in the world~~ is the drop-out rate of his disciples.

Leslie Newbigin in his book, The Good Shepherd, says "the church must be seen as that body of men and women who are the DOERS of the work of Christ, not merely the recipients of his love. The people must be the bearers of his love -- a team of workers rather than an institution for pensioners.

That strikes me as a great image, because Christians have too often treated their relationship to Christ and the church much like a pension plan -- they have only followed in order to "cash in" on the benefits. God has always had a different plan in mind. Instead of a pension program, God offers a cross. That becomes both the premium and the benefit of being part of the church. As God's people, we are offered the joyous opportunity of laying down our lives for the benefit of others -- never merely to "cash in" for ourselves.

You can't have Christianity without the price of the cross -- but many a Christian has succumbed to that very temptation. Many of us have known Christians who view the church's mission much like the John Hancock Society -- they send in their quarterly payments without fail, and thus, discipleship becomes nothing more than a pay-by-mail life insurance plan.

Others view the church and Christian mission as an emergency room. They drop in only when times are tough -- when life is hurting. Obvious-

ly, the church is commissioned to minister especially to people in crisis circumstances. But discipleship is not a one-way hand-aid society -- it is a partnership in which we are both recipient and giver.

Still others reject the cross of Christianity by making the church into a highway rest stop. Obviously - the church should be a place to be comforted, but not so that it becomes an escape from the main roadways of life. God offers us forgiveness in order to drive us right back into the congested traffic of our lives -- because that's where his love is most needed, where people are run over and by-passed by the recklessness and short-sightedness of others.

And of course one of the greatest temptations is to remove the cross by making the church into a Carnegie Hall Showplace. Which one of us hasn't at one time equated discipleship with the performance of the Sunday morning cast in the chancel -- whether its pastors, choir, organist, or someone else. Nothing destroys discipleship faster than top-rated entertainment in the sanctuary on Sunday morning.

God does not call us here to swoon over sermons sonatas, or songsters -- he calls us here to equip us as soldiers of the cross. We are outfitted to do battle against evil and to bring justice and love to those at the end of their ropes.

Jesus says: Take up your crosses and follow me. Jesus said this not so that his ego would be idolized, but so that his cause would be supported.

Is it any wonder why the Greeks of Jesus' day considered the word of the cross to be "a big folly?" The Greeks wanted a religion that appealed only to the intellect. They wanted a religion that was comfortable and convenient -- one which could be talked about

but one which did not cost them anything in terms of their lives. Is it any wonder that the Greeks rejected Christ and his cross as folly? -- it was highly irrational to sacrifice for the sake of others.

It would appear that there are still many like-minded Greeks with us today. For instance, one of the fastest growing religious followings in ~~our~~ cultural marketplace is the electronic church. If there was ever a movement that seeks to make religion easy -- this is the one. TV religion is only reinforcing the passive spectator syndrome of religion. Nothing could be more contrary to the commission of Christ than to sit in the comfort and convenience of one's living room drinking your beer while getting religion at the same time. Obviously, some of these TV evangelists have a legitimate market -- for shut-ins and other home bound people. But most of this sugar-coated, razzle-dazzle religion is the epitome of Christianity without the cross.

It is truly interesting to contrast this American model of super-religion with the status of religion in Israel today. A recent Gallup poll found that 96% of the American people claim to be religious -- they believe in God. In Israel - the homeland of our faith -- nearly 80% of the Israelis deny that they are religious.

Of course, most Israelis mean by that denial that they no longer keep the Sabbath or kosher laws. And yet with all this denial of being "religious" -- I have never seen a people who better classify as "disciples of the cross" -- even though they would be outraged by my image.

There can be no doubt about it -- Israeli people have come to know in their hearts and lives the real meaning of sacrifice "for the benefit of all." Their men serve 62 days of active duty each year in the military - until the age of 55. Their children must learn and speak three

languages fluently -- Hebrew, English, and Arabic. Their 250 kibbutzes, representing only 4% of the population, produce nearly 20% of the country's Gross Nat'l Product. And in addition, to live on one of these farms means you will serve as a major defense arsenal against foreign invasion or terrorism.

The people of Israel may not count themselves religious according to synagogue standards ... and they^{may} even be less likely to call themselves soldiers of the cross. But even though "religion" and the "cross" are intellectual stumbling blocks for them -- they are surely laying down their lives for one another today as much as one of their Jewish brothers did some 2000 years ago. They may not call their sacrificial existence a "religious life," but I can only believe that Jesus would classify it as one and the same thing.

Obviously, most of us here have matured beyond both the TV and Israeli view of religion. In other words, most of us here today consider ourselves "religious" people. And I hope we do that for at least two reasons.

First, I hope we see ourselves as "religious" because we are deeply grateful for the high price of God's love for us on that old rugged cross.

But equally important, I hope that we see ourselves as "religious" because Christ has challenged us to live up to his standards -- to live forever struggling to sacrifice for the benefit of others. Whether its in teaching or preaching, medicine or administration, labor or management -- Christ beckons us to take up the cross in these fields -- to live with a plan and policy of commitment to the highest standard of sacrifice that we can offer.

Powerful men throughout history have ridiculed

that standard of sacrifice -- they have called the word of the cross pure folly. They have chosen instead the wisdom of men. Counted among these powerful people have been the likes of Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini. Their lives were committed to human wisdom - namely, the amassing of political and military power.

But where are these wise men today? God has made foolishness of their wisdom and worldly ways. Throughout Christian history the end result has always been the same for the Hitlers and other wise men of the world: they have gone down to dust, time after time. Only the church continues to live over these 2000 years -- that is, the church which lifts high the cross of Christ.

Truly amazing isn't it -- that the greatest symbol of sacrifice remains the greatest symbol of hope -- both for this world and the one yet to come.

AMEN

Pentecost XVI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
September 27, 1981

I Pledge Allegiance to..."

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is not authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.... Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law."

Romans 13:1-2,8

Imagine that for weeks and months - the following headlines had been repeating themselves in the ~~media~~ ^{media}:
"RELIGIOUS RADICALS DISRUPT THE STATE SENATE AT THE CAPITOL; PENDING LEGISLATION IS CONFISCATED AND BURNED IN WASTE BASKETS. This is the 12th incident in as many weeks. Upon leaving the state Capitol, the religious enthusiasts embarked for Columbus police headquarters with dynamite and hand grenades. As the protestors marched by - this exclusive interview was given by their leader, Simon Judas:

When asked why ^{his} their group was disobeying and destroying both local and state government, Simon said: "We pay tribute to no one except God. There is no king, no governor no chief for us except God himself. God has given us a vision to rebel against all authorities; he will not help us unless we embark on violent action to help ourselves. We have sworn and pledged ourselves to careers of murder and violence against all governing authorities. We will pay tribute to no one except God."

Does this interview sound far out? It may sound far out but it was the exact condition facing the Roman Church at the time that Paul was writing this letter. Civil disobedience was rampant. And it was all led by a group of religious radicals known as the Zealots. Because of the injustice and crime that they had seen in their culture, they had appointed themselves TO OVERTHROW ALL AUTHORITY. They felt in over-throwing the authorities they would finally purge the nation and culture of all of its corrupti

Can you now see why Romans 13 is called the greatest biblical treatise on civil obedience. It's pretty

obvious why St. Paul said: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities ... and that those who exist in authority have been instituted by God." The Zealots had created chaos for Roman culture and government; they had totally misconstrued God's intent for the world.

And yet which one of us hasn't over-reacted like the Zealots?? Which one of us hasn't tried to take God's law and will into our own hands??? In some ways -- I did that very thing last week in my sermon.

In commenting on the recent death of Peter Sawicki-- I made the point that our local police authorities must respond to the cry for help regardless of the lines of jurisdiction. As much as we all may agree with this notion theologically -- it is never quite the simple black and white issue that I may have conveyed.

Thanks to a very thought provoking response that I received this week -- I was made aware that police officers have no authority beyond certain boundaries. Or stated in the positive - they are legally held within certain boundaries for the benefit and protection of their own constituency. To go outside those boundaries MIGHT IN A REAL WAY jeopardize their own constituency.

In short -- just like any other citizen, police officers dare not take the law into their own hands. As much as they or we are sympathetic to the cry for mercy -- we all must be warned about ASSUMING AUTHORITY that no one has given us. Obviously - it's tragic when death occurs as a father tries to defend his daughter; I'm confident I might have done the same thing. But like the Zealots of Paul's day -- I must realize that when I take the law into my own hands, I run the risk of personal harm...or possible death.

This is surely further illustrated by the story of one of my best friends in another state. His police department and city have come under great fire lately because of an untimely death a few years ago.

The incident involved a young man in his 20's. He owned a fancy van, and through his own family & neighbors -- he learned that someone had been trying to vandalize the van. So one night he decided to protect his van by staying inside it with a loaded gun. During the night-- one of his neighbors

movement
noticed **A** in the van. But of course, the neighbor did not know it was him. Thinking it was a burglar, the neighbor called the police. The police responded immediately, without sirens or lights. When they confronted the van - the young man inside confronted them with a hand gun. Obviously defending themselves -- the police fired. And the young man *was shot and killed.*

AGAIN -- this was a great tragedy. But much *like* the Zealots of old -- this young man was defying the God-give authorities in *his* community. He was taking the law into his own hands. And in doing so - he was risking personal injury and even death. The same is true for all of us.

God makes very clear through St. Paul that he is opposed to this self-appointed kind of authority. God has instituted government and its various branches to give order to our society. God is opposed to vigilanteism -- whether its one individual or a whole group like the Zealots or Klu Klux Klan. God says -- "pay all authorities what they are due -- ... revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due."

But God does not drop the whole matter here. God is very much for law and order -- but he has a higher standard than the local authorities who may use "law and order" as a campaign slogan. He calls those who follow him to a higher allegiance than political law and order -- a higher allegiance than the flag and that for which it stands. God says by all means "love your country and its governing authorities" -- but don't stop there.

Go one step further as I have already gone with you. "Love your neighbor as yourself"-- or put in the vernacular: love and forgive one another when you have failed one another -- even as I have continued to love and forgive you when you have failed to live up to my law."

That's why God continues to gather us together on the sabbath -- to remind us that we are not only to love our country and its authorities -- but that we are to love one another as he first loved us. He calls us to a higher allegiance. Whether we are two or three ... or two hundred or three hundred -- his message is still the same: you have

received my forgiving love even in spite of your stubbornness and failures; now go and forgive one another so that you can govern the world without yesterday's guilt.

God calls us not to give mere blind obedience to flag, country, and governing authorities -- but to give *intelligent* allegiance to his power in our relationships with family, local authorities, or national leaders. In essence God is saying: make today the beginning of a new day ... a new life. Yesterday's failures have been forgiven because I am in the midst of you. Now because of that forgiveness, make tomorrow better than yesterday. Give greater allegiance to me and my love tomorrow ... and then your neighbors will know they need not fear.

As individuals, as local authorities, as national governments -- we all have made errors which have been costly -- sometimes even involving death and destruction. But yesterday's failures will give us no hope for tomorrow. If yesterday's laws are no longer effective -- then they need to be re-written for a better tomorrow. If yesterday's justice is unfair -- then it needs redrafting for a better tomorrow. But these mistakes of yesterday will never be forgotten without GIVING ALLEGIANCE first of all to the forgiving love of God.

As our bulletin cover indicates -- there is "no wrong" in that kind of love. So let us love one another with **LOYALTY & ALLEGIANCE** above all to God and his love ...

- A love which regrets yesterday's mistakes, yet forgives those who have *made them*.
- A love which does not take the law into its own hands, but seeks to affirm those called to uphold our allegiance to justice and freedom for all.
- A love which seeks to change those laws which no longer fulfill the greater law of God.

AMEN

PENTECOST XVI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
September 19, 1982
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"A TIME TO SPEAK ... AND A TIME TO LISTEN!"

And taking the deaf man aside from the multitude privately, Jesus put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue; and looking up to heaven he sighed and said: "ephphatha," that is, "be opened." And (the man's) ears were opened, his tongue released, and he spoke plainly. ... And the crowd marveled saying, "He has done all things well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak."

Mark 7:33-35,37

One of the boys in my grade school neighborhood in Oshkosh, Wisconsin was what we then called, "deaf and dumb." He couldn't hear and he couldn't speak. I have vivid memories of that boy to this very day because my friends and I were often hard on him. He was often the object of unfair rejection and ridicule. It hurts me today to recall the way we used to poke fun at him.

Having known a young boy like that I have great appreciation for the miracle story before us today. I can't imagine how magnificent it would have been for that boy to have heard the words, "Ephphatha," ... "Be opened."

The facts are most of us here today have been graced with relatively good hearing. We can all claim at least one gift of the Holy Spirit -- we have been given the ability to hear the Word of God. And that is a tremendous, unearned gift!

And yet like many other gifts of life -- it is one which we so often take for granted. As Jesus so often said, we have ears to hear, yet so often we do not hear or listen. We allow our own agendas, our own concerns, our own problems to get in the way of hearing God and one another.

That was graphically illustrated for me this past week in calling on a patient at one of our local hospitals. Over the past few years - this patient had been hospitalized many times in this institution. Her case was well known on the 6th floor. Her case was one of severely advanced emphysema.

Amidst her very heavy and difficult breathing, she was relaying to me her desire to die ... she had fought the good fight for physical life, and was now ready to accept the victory God had promised her. We were about to share Holy Communion, when a resident doctor entered without apology to take "another" medical history.

It was obvious from his mumbled introduction and the patient's facial confusion that he had never seen her before. He immediately began asking her routine medical questions -- questions which she had answered thousands of times before and which she was in no shape to tolerate at this time. Finally she broke in and asked: "Are you a doctor?" He made no response. She said, "You aren't my doctor, why are you here?" Again he made no response. He continued his battery of questions. She answered by again asking him: "Who are you? I don't know you. What do you want?" At that point the doctor very curtly said to her: "I'm the doctor; you're the patient; I'll ask the questions; you answer them."

I had all I could do to restrain my anger. Here was a dying patient who was simply trying to establish a level of trust. And here was a doctor that didn't realize that listening to the patient EVEN FOR A MINUTE OR TWO might help establish a level of trust and help him be a more effective in his practice.

Because of his unwillingness to listen -- both he and the patient ended that encounter very frustrated with one another. Just listening to her need to better know him ... just taking an extra minute or two to respond to her concerns COULD HAVE MADE THOSE MOMENTS INTO HEALING MOMENTS ... rather than HURTFUL MOMENTS.

That was possibly Gladys Mays last encounter with a doctor in this world. She died on Friday. Pastor Camlin will have her funeral tomorrow. Thank God she died with the assurance of his peace ... she received that assurance again on Thursday after we shared Holy Communion for the last time.

The doctor in that situation illustrated one of the great dilemmas of our day -- we simply don't take time to listen! He probably had a very busy day yet ahead of him; for him that five minutes was mere routine. For Gladys May it was a time of walking through the valley of the shadow of death. She needed someone who cared .. who would listen to her

final requests ... her last words of life.

Obviously - Gladys would have probably died even if the doctor had listened with greater sensitivity. But her last day further illustrates the application of God's power of love in the simple process of listening.

Jesus did not have to pause in order to heal the deaf man in today's text. We know that he could have healed the man by merely saying the word. But Jesus humanizes this situation to better illustrate HOW WE, HIS DISCIPLES, CAN IMPROVE OUR HEALING TECHNIQUE.

First, we are told that Jesus took the man aside away from the multitude. By that action Jesus was clearly giving the man his full attention. There could be no doubt in the deaf man's mind -- Jesus was tuning into the real needs of this man.

The point is obvious -- the first step of healing, of hope, of love, of listening IS TO GIVE ONE ANOTHER OUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION. Healing, love, listening -- all of them require attentiveness.

The good news of today's Gospel is that God takes time to hear us and to heal us (even when we so often don't do the same for him). God takes time to be personally and individually attentive to us. That's what Holy Baptism is all about: God taking time to take us aside with him -- to heal us eternally not only with words, but with his visible touch of cleansing water. Likewise Holy Communion. Not just words of forgiveness -- but physical elements which God puts into our inner being.

God takes time to listen to us -- to hear us out and to assure us of his love and forgiveness. But that's only one side of the communication cycle. Faithfulness means listening to God as well.

As pastors we often hear people say: "You don't have to go to church to believe in God." That's obviously true, but the question remains for that person: If you don't go to church, then when do you regularly listen to God??? That's the whole purpose behind churches and worship -- TO GIVE US AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE ATTENTIVE TO GOD. And the general facts are that people who don't give God any attention on Sunday morning don't give

Him any attention the rest of the week either. In short, they don't listen to God! And those who don't listen to God can hardly be classified as faithful.

Jesus takes the deaf man aside to illustrate that healing, hope, and love are made possible through attentive listening. But he gives this man more than attention -- he touches him and offers his saliva (which was the ancient form of remedial help). In short, Jesus gets physical in order to give assurance and understanding.

Obviously - Jesus was not suggesting physical touch the way Olivia Newton John has suggested it today. But he was suggesting that hope, and healing, and love are often mediated through our physical presence with one another.

Again - I hate using the encounter of this past week but again it illustrates Jesus' point for us. In questioning Gladys -- the doctor chose to sit at the far end of the bed ... totally distancing himself from the patient. There was no way that such distance could ever communicate real concern ... real caring ... real interest in the patient. The physical distance made it clear that he did not want to personally engage himself in this person's life.

Jesus on the other hand takes the deaf man's ears -- he shows the man that he is aware of the man's misfortune -- his touch is one of understanding and assurance. It is like the touch of a mother to her newborn infant -- the infant doesn't need a lot of words, just the fingertips of love are sufficient to offer reassurance and meaningfulness.

God not only gives us words of hope and healing, he touches us with the water, the wafer and the wine of his presence. He calls upon us to touch one another -- to hold one another in moments of grief -- to uplift one another in times of joy -- to offer the handshake of peace and fellowship whenever we gather together.

Finally - Jesus says: "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." Words are offered only after attention and physical presence are first given. Jesus humanizes healing -- he only talks after he has first listened and given reassurance.

It is because of His attentiveness ... his reassuring physical touch ... and finally his words of uplifting hope, that people have marveled saying: He does all things well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak.

People will say the same of us. We too will do all things well AS WE LEARN TO LISTEN BEFORE WE SPEAK. We too can be a miraculous power of love in the world as we offer one another our undivided attention ... as we reassure one another through physical touch ... and as we share the words of God's peace and hope especially to those who are walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

AMEN

PENTECOST XVI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
September 7, 1986 (Rally Sunday)
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

CALCULATING THE COST!"

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brother and sisters - yes, even his own life - he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Luke 14:25-27

Some years ago Time magazine asked a random group of Americans to rate what they considered the one hundred significant events in history. The results were quite amazing. Number one was Columbus' discovery of America. Three events tied for 14th place: the discovery of X-rays, the Wright brothers' first flight, and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. X-rays and airplane flying rated as equally significant with the crucifixion of Christ with the general public.

This is really a fitting illustration for today's text. Because Jesus was not directing this parable or its sayings at the highly committed. He was directing these thoughts at his "would-be-followers" -- those who were still following the crowd. Before you follow, says Jesus, "Calculate the Cost." Understand that I'm not asking to be 14th place in your life - I'm asking to be #1 -- Uno Numero! So, please, don't follow ... don't get involved in this Christian discipleship ... don't join the church ... until you have CALCULATED THE COST!

After having been in parish ministry more than 15 years and married more than 17 years -- I must admit: this is one text that should be read, explicated, analyzed, and thoroughly exegeted for every family of church workers, esp. for those who are spouses of church workers. Most people who marry pastors or other church workers JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF THE CALL OF JESUS CHRIST. They see the CALL as just another option ... just another duty of the church ... just another career obligation or choice.

Is it any wonder that so many church families suffer from never-ending feuds. When someone has experienced the "Call" of Jesus Christ, it's not just another career option! It's like an all-consuming fire! It can't be rationally explained; it can't be logically analyzed. It can only be experienced and responded to! But it is real. And once "called," there is no greater priority of mission than the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

I can assure you that Susan has quite painfully at

times experienced this dimension in my life. And in the last couple of months, I can imagine that Jon Apgar has experienced this dimension in Debbie's life. Certainly Bob knew this reality in Montana - so much so that Karen could no longer accept Bob and Jesus Christ. (Janet, be prepared to share you life with Christ.) Is it any wonder that people who respond to the CALL of Christ have often been called "fools for Christ." That's the way the world sees Christian discipleship. Anyone who would get excited about the love and compassion and justice and forgiveness of Jesus MUST CERTAINLY BE A FOOL. He even commands us to love our enemies! Nothing could be more foolish by the world's standards. ONLY FOOLS COULD POSSIBLY FOLLOW JESUS CHRIST! That's also why there's a lot of part-time pay in the church, but no such thing as a part-time job! And only fools would accept part-time pay for full-time work. And so it is that the church has many full-time fools for Christ getting part-time pay ... or no pay!

Yes, that's the way the world sees the Christian faith -- as a bunch of fools! But what else would we expect from the world? The basic mentality of the world is: "GET BY WITH AS LITTLE AS YOU CAN GIVE!" Certainly, don't get sacrificial -- someone might think you're nuts! The world says, "Go for the quick and easy markets!" "Don't do anything that requires much work, look for the easy way!" We live in a fast-food, instant cereal, weekend-retreat, take-it-easy world!

There's a marketing mentality today which says that the valuable things of life can be yours without effort, without discipline, without pain, without paying the price, without sacrifice. Just look at the best-sellers in our bookstores: "Ten Easy Ways to Improve Your Personality." "Six Easy Steps To Instant Weight Loss." But try and market a book called: "Christian Discipleship: An Easy and Profitable Activity!" It's impossible - because Christ never portrayed it that way!

Reminds me of the story of the two women ironing shirts in a laundry. One of them is holding a button which has just come off a shirt she is ironing. The other woman say: "Just dip it into the starch, and press it back on!" Isn't that the way our world has come to see the solution of problems. A quick, easy fix -- THAT NEVER LASTS! Always the easy way ... the short-cut method ... the effort that requires no sacrifice for others!

It's like the story of the mountaineer who was noted for his excellent marksmanship. When asked about his expertise, he said it was really easy. "I just fire a round at a big tree and then I draw a bulls-eye around it!" Quick and easy marksmanship - that's so often the orientation of our teaching. It's almost as if we say

that we don't want people to reach for lofty goals. It's like the fisherman casting from the pier. A little boy was watching him with great curiosity. He caught the first fish; measured it at six inches, and put it in his basket. Then he caught a second; measured it at nine inches, and put it in his basket. In a few minutes, there was a mighty tug. He came up with a 25-inch Northern. And without hesitation, he threw it back into the water.

The little boy was aghast! He ran over to the old man and said: "Why in the world did you toss that back in? The old man spat out a chew of tobacco and answered, "Well, boy, I only got me a ten inch frying pan!"

Isn't that the way we often function as Christians. We let the size of the frying pan determine the level of our commitment and catch! How many times have we caught ourselves saying: "Oh, we can't do that - it will be just too costly -- it will require too much of us!!

Well, that's exactly the spirit of Jesus Christ and his followers! They live for costly causes! That's why Jesus uses a Semitic hyperbole in today's text when he says we must "hate" father, mother, wife, and even our own life. "Hate" in Hebrew means "to yield for a higher priority." "Loving like Christ" has no comparison; it is the highest standard of our lives -- higher than even family. It is the all-consuming lifestyle of a disciple.

In a small way my daughter, Angie, reminded me this past week of this lifestyle regarding her Jr-high principal at DeVeaux. Mr. Hart, the principal, is known to go around to rooms giving away dollars and lottery tickets to all the kids who show "dedicated school spirit!" Angie's comment was: "I think Mr. Hart is going to go broke! He gives so much away!" I'm really glad that Angie is being exposed to someone who isn't afraid to sacrifice for a good cause. That principal's motto is: "Good schools don't just happen - they take leaders who are willing to sacrifice and suffer a little!" I'm glad there are a few leaders around this world who still live by this principle of Christ.

It's like the story of Bertoldo de Giovanni. Here was a man who knew the meaning of CALCULATING THE COST! You may not know this sculptor, but he had a famous pupil named Michelangelo. Michelangelo was 14 when he came to Bertoldo. It was apparent this young man was gifted. But Bertoldo was a wise man - he knew that gifted people are often tempted to coast rather than grow. So he was persistent with Michelangelo. One day in the studio he found Michelangelo toying with a piece of sculptor far beneath his abilities. Bertoldo grabbed a hammer and smashed the work to smithereens, shouting as he did: "Michelangelo, talent is cheap; dedication is costly!"

Jesus had a lot more than talent; he had dedication. And dedication is costly! The Gospel we treasure was not some cheap message easily spoken some 2000 years ago. The message was paid for in blood. And that is the secret of its greatness: "Talent is cheap; dedication is costly!"

That's why we gather around this table of the Lord at least once a month (even though it should be more often). Because it is the graphic reminder that Jesus Christ is more than cheap talent; he paid the highest price for his dedication to us. That's why we take the time to Install our Teachers and our new Director of Education: BECAUSE WE ARE NOT UPLIFTING CHEAP TALENT, BUT WE ARE AFFIRMING COSTLY DEDICATION OF LIVES TO JESUS CHRIST!

We all need to spend a little more time CALCULATING THE COST OF OUR FAITHFULNESS AND DISCIPLESHIP. Far too many of us have offered a cheap response to the love of Jesus Christ. And cheap responses are always the same: THEY NEVER LAST! They are like ironing a button on with starch. They are not reflective of the eternal commitment made to us by God our Father.

Some of us wonder why there is so much terrorism and infidelity and easy-take-overs of corporations in our world? The answer is simple: HUMANITY WILL NO LONGER MAKE ANY SACRIFICES FOR ANYONE BUT HIMSELF -- HIS OWN GREED! Parents today want their children to be good Christians, but so often those parents aren't willing to CALCULATE THE COST! It takes commitment and example and dedication, not just dropping them off at Sunday School. Church members want a church that is vital and alive and booming with great programs -- but many times they don't CALCULATE THE COST! As long as somebody else bears the burden, they figure they can just float along! It's that kind of easy discipleship that has caused many a church to sink!

God has already CALCULATED THE COST OF THE KINGDOM -- he compares it to a pearl of great price. That means he sees you and I as having not only great worth, but even greater potential. BECAUSE WE ARE THE PEARLS OF HIS KINGDOM! And only as we allow ourselves to become ground and polished in serving others - do we gain our total value to God. And when you calculate that cost -- there is no other way ... BECAUSE THAT IS THE WAY OF BEARING THE CROSS OF JESUS CHRIST ... AND THAT IS THE WAY OF ALL TRUE DISCIPLES!!

AMEN.

PENTECOST XVI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
August 31 & Sept. 3, 1989
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

C O U N T T H E C O S T !

Now great multitudes followed Jesus, and he turned and said to them, "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

Luke 14:25-27

There's a delightful story about two marketing managers. One was clean-shaven - no matter how hard he tried, he could not grow a beard. The other had a long, thick, bushy beard. One day the clean-shaven manager asked the other, "Friend, you have such a handsome beard; I was wondering if you'd sell it to me?!"

Being a marketing specialist -- always looking out for a good deal, the friend answered, "Why not -- that is, if the price is right!"

"I'll pay you whatever you ask," replied the clean-shaven one. "There is only one condition: I want the beard to remain on your face. I will care for it - I will trim it, brush it, perfume it. You get to keep the beard on your face - but I will own it completely.

His friend was quite surprised -- but what a deal: he wouldn't have to care for his beard anymore ... yet it was still on his face. So he sold his beard. And the clean-shaven manager kept his word about caring for the beard. At any hour of the day or night - he would appear at his friend's house or office -- even at corporate board meetings -- and start grooming the beard. Sometimes he would bring a fine tooth comb and pull on the beard for half-an-hour. Other times he would coat the beard with heavy and even unpleasant perfumes. No matter how busy or what activity the bearded man might be doing, the clean-shaven manager would exercise his right to care for his beard.

Very soon this constant grooming became more than the bearded manager could take. "I can't stand this any longer," he cried, "I'm going to have my beard shaved off!" "What!" replied the clean-shaven one, "You mean MY beard. If you do, I will sue you. Under contract - that's my beard.

Finally the bearded manager said: "All right. I surrender. I want to buy back my beard. What will you take??" The clean-shaven man said, "Well, I've grown very fond of this beard, but I guess if you pay five times what I bought it for -- I'll let you shave it. The bearded man paid and then shaved off his beard.

What should be obvious from this story is that the bearded man had failed to really COUNT THE COST from the very beginning. He only thought about himself and his short-term gain. He overlooked the long-term, TOTAL commitment. He hadn't considered that such a commitment would involve INCONVENIENCE, INTERRUPTION, INAPPROPRIATE AROMA, AND MANY TIMES PAIN AND DOWNRIGHT DISPLEASURE. Even though it was only a beard, it mean a total commitment of his life to the priorities, pleasures and plans of his clean-shaven friend. The bearded manager had literally surrendered his life to the will and whims of Mr. clean-shaven.

This may sound like an exaggerated tale to many of you. But be cautious in your judgment. For many of us in this room -- there was a time when we stood before an altar and said "I do" or "I will." Like the bearded man, it's so easy to say, "LET'S DO IT" ... but it's another thing TO DO IT in sickness and in health ... in good times and bad ... during faithful and unfaithful days ... when the kids and their five friends are totally invading the privacy of your Sunday afternoon nap. Then we realize that the commitment of "I do" involves inconvenience, interruption, inappropriate aromas, and many times downright pain and displeasure.

Or for those of you here who have fought the good fight of sobriety -- you know only too well how easy it is to say "I'll quit." But you also know that a life commitment to quitting is oftentimes very inconvenient, very interruptive, and filled with downright pain and displeasure.

Likewise - we Christians profess every Sunday "I believe in the forgiveness of sins," but its sometimes very inconvenient to forgive a friend ... it sometimes downright painful to forgive your pastor or the church for their imperfections (because after all - God's people and place must be perfect) ... it's often very interruptive to forgive and forget when we'd rather persecute and punish.

Is it any wonder that Jesus urges us to COUNT THE COST if we're really serious about discipleship. You see - he knows that we sometimes reflect upon the COSTS of marriage and mortgages and career moves and upward mobility and money management, etc. But what about COUNTING THE COST of total commitment to his lifestyle???

Now do you see why Jesus uses a Semitic hyperbole in this text. Obviously - he doesn't expect us to HATE our family members. But the hebrew word "hate" means "to yield to the highest priority." So when he says "hate your father" -- he is reminding us that there is an even higher priority than family in true discipleship. In other words, loving like Christ can sometimes interrupt and cause inconvenience to the family when there is a higher good to be achieved at that moment.

Or to put it another way -- loving Jesus Christ is not just another small piece of LIFE'S CULTURAL PIE. Discipleship means so much more than going to church every Sunday, or serving on a committee or giving your \$20/\$25 a week pledge to God's work. Disciples obviously do these things -- but they are not first priority! First priority is to COUNT THE COST -- TO MAKE CERTAIN THAT YOUR DAILY PLANS, PRIORITIES, AND PLEASURES ARE A REFLECTION OF CHRIST'S LOVE, COMPASSION, AND MERCY FOR OTHERS.

That's why Jesus addresses this issue as he is journeying toward Jerusalem. Because he is aware that there is a large crowd following him ... and like the bearded man, he doesn't want anyone to be misled about his way of discipleship. On the surface - many followers thought that following Jesus would lead to the good life ... to a victorious life over all their enemies. But Christ had to make clear that following him will mean interruptions to good times, will mean serving others when its inconvenient, will sometimes mean downright pain and displeasure. Or said in Jesus' vernacular -- "whoever does not want to bear the cross ... cannot be my disciple!"

In short, discipleship is not for the curiosity seeker but for the committed servant. In our world today -- there are many Christians that seem to have what I call a "hot flash faith." They get all charged up with some kind of spiritual gush ... but as soon as faithfulness becomes inconvenient or interruptive or downright painful -- then they're out the back door as soon as they came in the front door. Jesus makes very clear that discipleship is fraught with pain and persecution. Jesus says - COUNT THE COST - "follow me if you SEEK DELIBERATE DEDICATION rather than reckless resolve ... follow me if you WANT CLEAR-EYED COMMITMENT rather than a flood of momentary feeling ... follow me if you DESIRE TO BE FISHERS OF MEN rather than keepers of acquairiums.

It reminds me of the missionary woman in Africa who had worn herself out and was sent home to recover. The doctor told her that her responsibilities were killing her. Since she was nearing retirement - he told her to go home. Instead, she persistently rebuilt her health so that she could return to reorganize her missionary school. She set her goal for returning ... and began while in the states to buy the supplies she would need for the expanded school.

One day she went to a bookstore to buy a world globe. Not having much money - she was first shown the cheaper globes. Then down the aisle the clerk demonstrated the larger globes, showing her one globe that offered a light from the inside. The clerk commented: "This globe would be much nicer, but, of course, a lighted world costs much more." The missionary replied: "Oh I know a great deal about how much it costs to light the darkness of the world!!"

That's the REAL COST OF discipleship of Jesus Christ -- lighting the darkness of the world wherever it is found. And that's a lot more of a life commitment than being in church for an hour on Sunday morning. In preaching, we pastors sometimes refer to church members as "lights of Christ in the world." We must be careful in doing that - it can really smack of being far TOO GENEROUS, TOO EASY, too POTENTIALLY SELF-RIGHTEOUS. One friend said to me several years ago -- "to name your own virtue is to lose it." I think we must be very careful when we claim to have the fulness of Christ's light.

Living soldiers of the cross AVOID ALL SUCH SELF-RIGHTEOUS CLAIMS. Rather we COUNT THE COST every day of the ways that we might help to lighten the darkness of the world. That's what "humbling yourself" truly means -- it means taking a daily inventory ... COUNTING DAILY HOW MUCH LIGHT YOU AND I HAVE SHED UPON THE DARKNESS OF THIS WORLD.

When I COUNT THE COST like that -- then I become aware of what a little flicker of Christ I am in this world. Then I realize how I sometimes renig on Christ because of inconvenience ... because I don't want to be interrupted ... because I don't want any pain or downright displeasure in my life. I realize there are some days I'd give this whole discipleship thing back to Jesus for fifty times the cost that I've ever paid.

But then he reminds me of the cost that he paid -- not one hour a week on Sunday, not 10% of his income, not a few meetings a month -- BUT HIS WHOLE LIFE. And even when I'm frustrated by interruptions and inconvenience -- he still gives himself 100% to me -- he fully loves and forgives me even when I fail to COUNT THE FULL COST OF MY DISCIPLESHIP!

Is it any wonder that I continue to COUNT THE COST FOR HIM! Is there any other lifestyle that could offer better rewards to this world?? Is there any other light that could reflect greater harmony and wholeness for this world? How can anyone go wrong when he/she COUNTS THE COST of discipleship for Jesus Christ!

It's like the seminarians who were asked to personally COUNT THE COST of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. But their leader would not allow them to get away with the generic response - "It will cost me my life." That's saying so much that it's saying nothing at all. The female professor said, "Crosses have their own individual shape ... for each of us, there's a splinter that cuts into the flesh of our lives." So the seminarians were asked to reflect for two hours ... and then specifically write down THE COSTS OF THEIR DISCIPLESHIP!

For one, discipleship meant THE COST OF LUST ... for another it meant THE COST OF HIS PRIDE OF A QUICK MIND ... for another THE COST WAS HER DESIRE FOR A BIG CHURCH ... for another THE COST OF A WELL KNOWN NAME ... for another THE COST OF NOT HAVING ALL THE ANSWERS ... for another THE COST WAS TO LISTEN MORE AND TALK LESS. EACH SEMINARIAN COUNTED THE COST OF HIS OR HER DISCIPLESHIP PERSONALLY & SPECIFICALLY.

That's the reason Christ has gathered us here today: to consider the shape of the cross that you and I are INDIVIDUALLY carrying. Do we feel it cutting into our flesh at all?? Is it penetrating enough to cause a little pain and displeasure?? Can we COUNT THE COST SPECIFICALLY OF OUR DISCIPLESHIP?? Is there anything or anyone barricading the priority of Christ's love in our lives? Thanks be to God ... that at least for the last 18 minutes you have taken the time to COUNT THE COST of your discipleship! And since you have succeeded in doing it for 18 minutes -- NOW YOU'VE LEARNED THE IMPORTANCE OF DOING IT FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIVES!!

AMEN.

PENTECOST XVI (RALLY SUNDAY)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
September 8, 1991
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"A NEW WORLD ORDER"

And taking the man aside from the multitude privately, he put his fingers into his ears; and he spat and touched his tongue; and looking up to heaven, he said: "Ephaphatha," that is, "Be Opened." And his ears were opened, his tongue released, and he spoke plainly. Mark 7:33-35

In 1933, Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt launched his "New Deal." In 1960, Pres. John F. Kennedy asked Americans to be pioneers on the "New Frontier." And now a generation later -- in fact just a year ago on Sept. 11, 1990 -- Pres. George Bush offered Americans and everyone else his vision of "A New World Order." Such a vision and even some of his words were very uplifting: "a new world order can now emerge," he said, "a new era, free from the threat of terror." How good it was in our world beseiged by terror to hear this hope-filled vision; and just six months later, most of the world was supporting Mr. Bush against a "threat of terror" in the Gulf.

But the realities of this past year have caused many to wonder about the ingredients of this "New World Order." In fact, many political experts claim that even President Bush is quite "vague and unforthcoming" as to what he really means by "A New World Order." Thanks to the analysis of several foreign policy makers, four models have emerged from all this "New World" vision. The first they call the "Interdependent Global Village Model." This model sees the world so closely inter-meshed that it is no longer possible to play the games of power politics from any country. However, this model forgets what life is most like in real villages -- the intimacy of village life creates envy, meanness, rivalry and cruelty (any of you who are from small, often rural towns can attest to these facts). Thus, this model is shortsighted.

The second model is called Pax Democratica. This vision of new world order sees a democratic revolution sweeping the world and sees this reality "as the greatest good for the world," because democracies don't fight one another. We have all seen the jubilation and the good of such democratic reforms in the U.S.S.R. However, advocates of this world order forget that in 1914 - Britain, France, & Germany (three of the most liberal and democratic nations) fought one of the most terrible wars of history. Again, this model suffers from utopian naivete.

A third model does not envision a decline in the use of force as do these first two. This model is called the Collective Security Model. It is a re-tread from pre-1939. As Pres. Bush himself stated, it forsees "a revitalized, peace-keeping function for the United Nations." Most critics of this model say that it ignores the fact that conditions of the Gulf War are most likely never repeatable. And therefore it would

be nigh impossible to ever create the coalition of nations that voted affirmatively for Resolution 678. Model three, like one and two, lacks the anchor of reality.

Lastly, there is the Pax-Americana Model. Here an authentic superpower which has proven itself, namely, the U.S. in the Gulf, imposes order on the rest of the world -- this nation becomes essentially a global police force. Sloganeers have postured this as the Lone Ranger Re-visited Worldwide; or stated another way, "Have smart bombs, will travel." But a host of critics say that "making wars will not provide a primary basis for national power in the new century ... esp. because this nation has neglected its technological and industrial base and become too dependent upon short-term foreign capital. These critics say that any nation that seeks to offer "New World Order" must have more than a war-making machine. They point out that the United States is the only advanced industrial nation without health insurance for all its inhabitants. It also numbers "one" in the percentage of its people behind bars. And most disturbing for this model -- its murder rate is unequalled anywhere in the world -- as Pres. Bush himself stated: "In the 100 hours of intensified ground war, more Americans were gunned down on U.S. city streets than in the Kuwaiti-Iraqi theatre.

Need I say any more about the shortcomings of all political, military, and economic models that boast "A New World Order." Every nation that has proported to create a "New World Order" without being deeply committed and attentive to God's vision of "peace and order" has instead perpetrated a monstrosity of chaos upon this world. For example, let us consider the culture that gave the world Auschwitz. This was the vision of "A New World Order" by a Nazi leader who had closed his ears and eyes to the Lord God of Creation. When one of his Nazi officers responsible for murdering the six million Jews was brought to trial, he pleaded: "I never thought it would come to that!" The sentencing judge responded: "It had already come to that when you condemned the first innocent person!"

Then there's the culture that gave us Pearl Harbor, the one that had a severe population problem. Again, this was a culture that was destined to create a "New World Order" with little or no allegiance to the Guidance of God Almighty, so it partially solved its population problems through 40 million abortions. Today this culture has a very serious production problem: not enough young workers to support and care for an aging and elderly population. All the Toyotas, Hondas, and Mitzibuschis will do nothing to resolve this human disorder.

And we all know about the nation and culture that gave the world the atomic bomb as an instrument for "A New World Order." What do we hear from a multitude of this nation's people today? We hear that many of these people believe that God is dead and Elvis is alive. Is it any wonder that there is chaos in a culture that is more committed to raising up Elvis than the resurrection of Jesus Christ?!? Certainly much of this culture and social order has become "deaf and dumb" to its True Author & Creator!

And that's the bottom line of today's texts: THERE CAN NEVER BE "A NEW WORLD ORDER" FOR ANY CULTURE THAT HAS BECOME DEAF AND DUMB TO THE VERY SOURCE OF ITS LIFE, GOD ALMIGHTY! Today's gospel makes clear that the first step of healing, of hope, of harmony, of peace and world order IS TO GIVE GOD, AND GOD ALONE, OUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION. That's the good news of today's gospel and every other healing gospel account of the New Testament! Jesus took the man aside, away from the multitude. By that action, Jesus was revealing the gracious character and merciful demeanor of our God. HE IS A GOD WHO SEEKS TO BECOME PERSONALLY AND INDIVIDUALLY ATTENTIVE TO US! That's what Holy Baptism ... and Holy Communion are all about -- God taking us aside and opening up our ears and our mouths to his physical presence ... offering his gracious good news of forgiving and everlasting love.

And once God has taken us aside and transformed us into soldiers of the cross - then we become ACTIVE LISTENERS TO HIS COMMANDS FOR A NEW WORLD ORDER. Then we hear his guidance not as harsh demands, but as gracious ways to love him and one another: "you shall have no other gods before me" - that's not a challenge, that's good news; "you shall remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy" - how could we do otherwise with such a gracious God; "you shall forgive as you have been forgiven" - there is no other option for a life that has been graced!

As pastors we often hear people tell us: "Well, pastor, I contend that you don't have to go to church to believe in God." That's absolutely and obviously true! But the question remains: "If you don't go to church, then when do you regularly listen to God's vision for "A New World Order." And we know the answer: Those who rarely worship God in church rarely live by God's vision for a New World Order -- which is not based upon human good works, but upon God's power of peace and goodness. That's why you and I are here participating in worship and Christian education today and every week: TO GIVE GOD OUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION ... TO BE INSPIRED BY HIS VISION FOR PEACE AND ORDER IN THIS WORLD ... TO BE TOUCHED BY HIS REAL PRESENCE ... TO SHARE THE POWER OF HIS BODY AND BLOOD SO THAT WE MIGHT BE INSTRUMENTS OF HIS TRANSFORMING LOVE FOR THE WHOLE WORLD!

That's why we have this same RALLY SUNDAY every second Sunday of September. Not because we get some kind of jollies out of blowing up balloons. Not because we believe we have triumphed over all the ills, upsets, and sins of this world. Not even because we can truthfully testify that our Sunday School or educational offerings are the very best to be found in Toledo. But because we believe that our educational programs and educational leaders are committed above all to CREATING A NEW WORLD ORDER BASED NOT UPON POLITICAL, ECONOMIC OR PHILOSOPHICAL IDEALISM ... BUT BASED UPON THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF THE LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST! And that's the only unique gift and goodness that we offer week after week in worship and Sunday School -- Christ's never-ending commitment to "open our ears" and "loose our tongues" for his love in this world.

One author has said that there are three kinds of people in every culture and every Christian community: those who make things happen; those who watch things happen; and those who wonder what has happened. Today on Rally Sunday ... and every other Sunday of the church year ... we give thanks for those Christian leaders and educators of Hope Lutheran who remain faithful to MAKING things happen by being committed to God's vision of a new world order for all people ... "where the eyes of the blind are opened ... where the ears of the deaf are unstopped ... where the lame man shall leap like a hart ... and the tongues of the dumb shall sing for joy." What a joy to have been here on Saturday not only watching our educational leaders getting their curriculum ready -- but being here with buckets and rags and Ammonia and cleaning the classrooms until they were spotless. These are not educational leaders who WATCH things happen ... or who WONDER what has happened -- these are leaders WHO MAKE GOD'S LOVE HAPPEN FOR ALL HIS BELOVED CHILDREN.

Just as he did on the Sunday that you and I were baptized, God again has taken us aside from the multitude of this world for a few moments. Through Jesus Christ, his fingers have touched our ears and removed the wax build-up ... and we now have a renewed understanding of the New Order that God wants for his world. Not an order of status, or privilege, or super power, but rather an order of giving unto the least of them and bringing the good news of his love to the lost and lonely and languishing in this world. And that same Jesus Christ has touched our tongues that we might speak more clearly than ever about sharing God's mercy with those held captive by guilt, by greed, by grief or by any other destructive demons of this world.

Yes, when people in this world see that God still does miraculously open the ears and loose the tongues of those who have been touched by him, then those same people will finally realize that only the love of Jesus Christ is the foundation for A New World Order.

AMEN.

PENTECOST 16
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
September 15, 1996
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“THE HIGH COST OF ~~LIVING~~ FORGIVING!”

Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times? Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven times.” Matt. 18:21-22

A pastor recently wrote in his commentary that Jessica Mitford in the 60's prompted concerns about *The High Cost of Dying* with her book by the same title. She caused quite a stir and only recently have Grief Specialists been able to demonstrate the value and integrity of funeral directors encouraging important rituals for the grief-stricken at the time of death. But one fact is certain in our current age: you don't hear too many people complaining about “the high cost of dying.” Most people today are concerned with the “high cost of living,” where inflation and basic necessities seem to be forever skyrocketing. Many of us find ourselves wondering when and where it will ever end.

But there is another “high cost of living” that really has very little to do with our pocketbooks. This cost relates to the spiritual and moral dimensions of life. We'd best let the politicians & economists struggle with the “high cost of living;” today's texts urge us as Christians to struggle with the “high cost of forgiving, or conversely, the “even higher costs of not forgiving.”

I was told that when Leonardo da Vinci was painting his masterpiece, “*The Lord's Supper*,” he had a terrible quarrel with one of his companions. In revenge for the wrong which he felt he had received, he painted his companion's portrait as the face of Judas. Now all that was left was to complete the face of Jesus. So daVinci waited for inspiration, because he wanted to paint the noblest and most perfect portrait of Christ that had ever been done on canvas.

Yet, try and try and try, daVinci simply could not master the face of Jesus Christ. Finally, he took his brush and painted out his companion's portrait from the visage of Judas. And then he sought out his companion and apologized for the hateful & indignant attitude he had harbored all along. The companion forgave daVinci. And the story goes that on that very night daVinci had a powerful dream that perfectly envisioned the face of Christ. The next day he painted his magnificent portrait of Christ that millions have gazed upon with awe ever since he completed it.

Do you believe this legend? Well, whether totally true or not, it perfectly illustrates today's focus upon the “high cost of forgiving.” Leonardo daVinci finally experienced the fulfillment of his professional dream thru the act of forgiveness. But it cost him dearly. He suffered great anguish and terrible grief; and then there was the courageous and costly confrontation with his companion ... and the confession & forgiveness itself. To realize the fulfillment of his masterpiece, he had to first pay the “high cost of forgiveness.”

Yes, forgiveness and many other things are among the “high costs of living.” Not one of us here today is unfamiliar with the burdens and high costs of health care, education, housing and other necessities of life. As a pastor, I commiserate weekly with those who are paying the financial and emotional costs of incurable diseases, college tuitions, utility bills or the after-effects of tragic disasters & accidents. Just imagine the emotional and financial costs we would be feeling right now if we were living in North Carolina or Bosnia or many overlooked nations of Africa. It is no picnic to deal with the high costs of living no matter where we are.

But let us not fool ourselves. Like daVinci, there are many among us right now who are living with “the high costs of forgiving” ... or shall we say the “even higher costs of not forgiving.” Time and time again I have had members come to me and ask the same question Peter asked of Jesus: “How much is enough?” “When can I feel I don’t have to forgive anymore?” “How often must I forgive when he/she keeps making the same mistakes over & over??”

Whenever I’m asked those questions, I know I’m really hearing another question: “Do I really have to pay the price of forgiveness??” And we all know that’s often a costly price to pay. Because which one of us here has not said at one time or another: “Enough is enough!!” We’ve all had those moments when we’ve been backed up to the wall and felt we were at the end of the rope. And being human, we’ve all had times when we’ve chosen separation & brokenness: **NOT TO FORGIVE!!** Yet, even as we made that choice, we dare not forget that Jesus’ has another costly Way: “not seven times, but seventy-times-seven; Peter you are always to forgive!!” And we all know the times that have seemed like an impossible dream; far too costly!! Is it any wonder that Jesus said it; he knew the Pharisees of his day would be unwilling to pay that cost; maybe seven times, but not seventy-times-seven!!

And, like the Pharisees or Peter, we too want to avoid paying that price. One of the great realities about Bible studies is that they often give me fodder for my sermons. This past week at Tuesday’s Bible study a member asked how I felt about divorce. I indicated I feel about divorce just like I feel about racism, and slander, and abusiveness, and stealing, lying, coveting & adultery, or not remembering the Sabbath: they are all wrong!! Then the person asked, “Well how do I feel if pastor continues to be a pastor when he/she gets a divorce or allows others to be remarried after a divorce??” The issue behind the whole question here was: “How do we treat a Christian who has broken the law?” Can we forgive a pastor or anyone else who has been divorced, been remarried, or even committed adultery, or broken one of God’s Laws?” Obviously, we can’t forget the pain; we can’t forgive the evil, but we must forgive the person. We struggled with these questions because we knew they were from the heart.

But ultimately, there is a higher and more costly calling; Jesus challenges us to respond as he did to Peter: “You must forgive seventy-times-seven!” And that’s very costly because it’s so much easier to simply resort to narrowness and judgmentalism and relying on the law: to cast off anyone who has broken our

view of morality. How tempting it is every moment of life to take the easy and often hostile way of just "breaking off the relationship!!" As a pastor friend once said: "It doesn't take much a Christian to act like an animal. Animals by nature get revenge; when attacked or hurt, they retaliate and attack back. But it takes a person of great faith and courage "to forgive, esp. when unfairly attacked." God challenges us to be "of such courage & faith!" And it seems to me I remember a powerful example of a Son of God who was unfairly attacked by a mob who wanted it their way ... a man who paid a very costly price when he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!"

Another pastor friend of mine said that Dr. Norman Vincent Peale had ten suggestions for practicing forgiveness. One of them was that every time you said the Lord's Prayer petition which says, "forgive my trespasses as I forgive others," Peale said insert the names of your offenders: thus, the petition would go: "Forgive me my trespasses, as I forgive Susan and Sarah and Jon and Debbie and Burt and Mary etc. etc." As the new interim at Glenwood, I ask you today what practice of forgiveness has been ongoing in your life ... and in this congregation. Oh, I know you have Communion twice a month; but that doesn't mean that you are forgiving others as you believe God is forgiving you. And if you aren't forgiving others, then God's forgiveness is given in vain!! It is not working!! He expects us to grace others as we have been graced by Him.

Maybe a little story of mine will help you understand the real meaning of Holy Communion and forgiveness. When serving in Troy, MI, I had a major disagreement with a member one evening and she walked out of the meeting. I called her the next day and supposedly things were patched up; we said we had forgiven each other. But the next Sunday morning when she came to church, I knew we were still at odds. She wouldn't look at me; she wouldn't talk to me; she was still very angry and hurt. When she came to the Communion rail, I took her hands and held them as I gave her the host; I looked into her eyes and she into mine and I said, "Jo, the body of Christ given for you & for me." We both started crying: I'm sure people around the rail figured we were having an affair or something. But God was truly present, which is exactly what we profess in communion. And we both paid a great price for his presence: it took great courage for her to come to church and communion that day; and it took great courage for me to pause at the rail and seek God's reconciliation. But the high cost was worth it; we were again one in Christ and I have never felt a greater embrace of God than the one we shared that day after worship!!

So what have you been practicing at Glenwood? Are you holding a grudge against anyone?? Maybe another member at Glenwood; maybe a family member; maybe a former pastor here or somewhere else? I know for a fact that I have heard some pretty judgmental things that have been said about your former pastors. Maybe you're holding a grudge against yourself ... maybe you've tied yourself all up in guilt!! I know of people who have had a terrible moment of immorality happen when they were younger and they are still lugging all that guilt around with them yet today. Why would we want to punish ourselves or anyone else when we believe in the costly power of Jesus

Christ “to forgive seventy-times-seven.” There are some who say they don’t believe in the Bible. I say: how tragic that they don’t understand that this is the only book in the world that advocates a treasure not found in any other creative expression: THE FORGIVENESS OF JESUS CHRIST!!

Today’s text goes on to tell us of an astronomical debt owed by a servant (you and me)--10,000 talents. Scholars say today that would be comparable to between 10 million and several billion dollars. The point is: THE MASTER CANCELLED IT! But that astronomical debt is still very much with us in this world -- an astronomical indebtedness caused by anger, brutality, racism, cheating, abusiveness, gossip, addictions of all kinds, and the list of human brokenness goes on and on. In Jesus Christ’s one sacrificial moment, God has cancelled forever all these debts ... all our trespasses! So how can we not forgive one another for the puny pettiness that we often hold against one other?? It’s a human tragedy when God cancels our great debt and we won’t pay the small cost of cancelling little trespasses.

Needless to say, I could preach about the cost of forgiveness for another hour or more ... but that would be way too costly for me, because you’d all leave ... and you’d never forgive me. But do we get it?? Forgiveness is at the very heart and soul of our God and our Christian tradition. When Luther was asked, “What is salvation?” he simply said, “The forgiveness of sin!” Forgiveness is always the right price to pay ... no matter how high the cost! So today, my new friends at Glenwood, we finally celebrate something that is very costly -- THE HIGH COST OF FORGIVING!!

AMEN.

Pentecost XVI
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
September 7, 1997
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“DOES GOD TAKE SIDES?”

“Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.” Isaiah 35:5 “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him? James 2:5 Then looking to heaven [Jesus] sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be Opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue released, and he spoke plainly. Mark 7:34-35

“DOES GOD TAKE SIDES?” An interesting question ... some might even call it a foolish question. Before today, I probably considered it unfair. But thanks to insights from Dr. Mark Powell, a N.T. scholar at Trinity Seminary, I was given a new vision into this text. We all know that Paul says elsewhere in the Bible that **“God shows no partiality.”** What Paul obviously means is that God allows **“the sun to shine on the just and the unjust-- and the rain to fall equally on both.”** Just because we’re believers does not mean that God is going to free us from any of life’s struggles. But Dr. Powell asserts that **“when people say that God doesn’t take sides, they are categorically wrong! God does take sides! Again, and again, and again in Scripture -- God is on the side of the poor, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the orphan, and obviously, the sinner!”**

Nothing better illustrates this than comments from a friend who has two sons (it doesn’t work as well with two daughters). Here’s what he says:

I have two sons - one older, larger and much stronger than the other. If I look out the window and see the older one beating up on the younger one - I dash outside immediately and TAKE SIDES. It’s not because I love the little one more. And it’s certainly not because I think the younger boy “is more right” or “behaves better than the older one.” I don’t even take time to find out “who’s right” or “who’s wrong” before I intervene. I take sides immediately because in our house big kids are not allowed to beat up on little kids. That’s the basic law. So, I always side with the little kid because he’s little. Period!

I wish my parents had fostered that rule ... cause sometimes my older brother got the best of me. But the point is obvious. And the same conclusion can be attributed to God. **Certainly**, God loves the rich and the poor; **certainly** he offers his goodness and grace to all nations and peoples; **certainly** God does not take the side of poor or oppressed because he thinks they’re better or more moral than others. **But God DOES SIDE with the poor and oppressed because they’re like a little kid being beat up by a big kid.** They are the underdog in our mean & cruel world ... and God seeks to always rescue the underdog. Period!

All three readings today reinforce this basic conviction of faith in God. The Israelites had been exiled to Babylon. They had been whipped by the big boys - the Babylonians & the Edomites. God now seeks to empower them with hope

& confidence to make their way back home safely. Obviously, they are fearful. So God assures them that he will "have vengeance" on the persecutors if they make the way treacherous. God promises Israel "she" will no longer be a people suffering from blindness, deafness, lameness and desert dryness. That was good news to this little kid - Israel!

Likewise, James attacks the blatant discrimination that so often occurred in the church of his day--and still occurs today: where status & wealth are given favor over poverty & need. Again, this is beating up on the little kids! When I was in seminary in the late 60's--a few of us tested out this perception of James. Along with another white & black seminarian - we went to a Chicago-Lutheran church in our jeans, sweatshirts & sandals. We had not shaved for a few days - so I'm sure we were viewed as Lake Michigan beach bums. We were consistently avoided by members in that congregation. The next Sunday we went back in our best suits & clerical collars. Amazingly - we were given the royal treatment -- and to our knowledge, nobody even recognized us as the same three from the previous week. It was obvious that these Christians were more concerned about our external condition than our internal needs or faith. They certainly didn't TAKE GOD'S SIDE the first week. Yet they surely sided with the privileged the second week.

Finally - we get to the classic gospel of this week -- two healing miracles. One to a woman, a Syphronecian woman--a real outsider! The other to a deaf mute -- a man who didn't fit into the normal scheme of the world. Obviously, the woman and the deaf mute represent "the little kids" of the world. And the world's tendency ... as we have already said ... is for the big kids to beat up on the little kids. But again - we see GOD TAKING SIDES -- he cures the woman's daughter and the man's deaf-muteness. But the first story of the Syphronecian woman forces us to take a deeper look.

Jesus' initial response to her is not "consistent with His Father." He tells her that his ministry is to God's children--(Israel)--not the dogs (obviously meaning the Gentiles). That sounds pretty strong; and it was. But that was the mentality of the day. Gentiles were viewed by Jews as "dogs" -- just the way we sometimes view other races or economic groups today. We may not admit it publicly -- but there are some sitting here today who have called people of different races & nationalities far worse names than "dogs."

And in this text we finally see that even Jesus needed to grow and better learn his Father's will: which was to have mercy & grace on all nations, not just Israel. What a great reality this evangelist allows us to see: that Jesus, the very Son of God, still needed to grow in his understanding of his Father's will. As we've learned from other texts -- Jesus often went to temple to gain a fuller understanding of his Father's business. And here we have an example of Jesus realizing that his Father's will included a mission to Gentiles -- and to Gentile women as well. Thanks be to God that we have a real persistent woman here who shows that miracles often happen only when we become God's agents who INSIST ON HIS WILL FOR OUR CHILDREN.

And we all saw a beautiful example of that in Thursday's BLADE -- the story of Chris Wallace -- the new black quarterback for UT--and his Mom's persistence in praying and working for a miracle for her son's ability to walk. Here was a boy who was very much like the Syphronecian woman or deaf-mute: he was told from the beginning of his life that he might never walk--he had club feet & other deformities. And more than that - he was a black baby boy. What were his chances for "making it in a predominately white power structure?"

But his mom believed in God and His power to change things. But that power is never a hocus-pocus power. It often takes a human agent to incarnate the presence of God. Just as Jesus became the human agent --he had to speak, to spit, and to touch to bring about healing. Likewise, it took a lot of speaking and praying & touching by this mother. But she kept on massaging Chris Wallace's feet ... and she kept praying that he would walk. In short, she kept on saying, "Ephphatha" -- "Be whole ... start walking." And miraculously, Chris Wallace did not walk -- he ran. And he's been running ever since ... including great running in his debut at the glassbowl as starting quarterback Saturday night.

This morning - I just finished running with over 4000 people in the RACE for the CURE. This is a miracle in process -- God is still inspiring people all over this country to find a cure for breast cancer. But that miracle will never happen if people don't get involved in the race. God never said that miracles just happen instantly. It was not that way for polio; it's rarely that way for any disease. But it takes a lot of human agents to keep on running and walking and touching and researching to make miracles happen. And along the way it even takes someone like Kathy Schaedler to give their lives for the cause so that others will work harder to find the cure. But just as God helped Israel overcome the Babylonians & Edomites -- he will help us overcome breast cancer and other hideous diseases. He will have vengeance on all persecutors of life!

But he needs people who will be inspired for his cause to cure, whether the cure is for cancer or for divorce or for simple human bitterness & gossip. All these conditions of separation need miraculous intervention. And God is saying to each of us, "Ephphatha" -- "Be Open ... open your ears, your eyes, your hands to help!!" Few of us here are deaf-mutes -- yet many of us have often been "hard of hearing" when God asks us to "take his side." We've seen and heard terrible racism -- yet we've responded like deaf-mutes. We've seen and heard people abusing others in words & in deeds--yet we've often responded like deaf-mutes. We've seen & heard people crying for compassion and help -- yet we've responded like deaf-mutes.

We all need to hear Jesus say to each of us, "Ephphatha" -- "Be open ... take my side for someone who needs a little miracle." Like Jesus with that woman, we are all still on a learning curve. But God finally did show his Son the way -- that to "take his side" is to open your heart, your hands, and even give your whole life to those crying for help. WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON? Every time you prevent "the big kids from beating up on the little kids" -- you are doing the will of your Father in heaven!
AMEN.

*Pentecost XVI
Glenwood Lutheran, Toledo
September 23, 2001
Peter R. Martyn, Guest Preacher*

Prayerfully Focused

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. I Tim. 2:1-2

In the midst of troubled times, sometimes a little humor can be a helpful diversion. This week I found such a story that relates to the focus of prayer. It's the story of a young boy who was asked to say grace at the family dinner table. Like a faithful child, he graciously accepted the task. His prayer was going along nicely when all of a sudden he included a petition about his younger sister: "And yes, Dear God, I hope my sister gets caught for eating all the Oreos this afternoon!" When he finished praying, his sister quickly excused herself from the table. Then his parents said, "Son, it's not nice to use prayer to tattle on other people – and you shouldn't pray to get even with others."

The boy responded: "I wasn't trying to get even. I just thought maybe God didn't see her eat the Oreos, so I wanted to make sure that he knew what was going on."

If the truth be told, our children are probably not the only ones who have used prayer to "help God do his job." Obviously, this little boy's parents tried to use this occasion to clarify the focus of prayer: prayer seeks not to tell God what I need to do for him, but what He needs to do for me! In today's exhortation from Paul to Timothy – we find Paul trying to do the same thing as the parents did for their son: to offer some practical & truthful guidance about "Prayerful Focus." In light of the ongoing tragedy of Sept. 11th and the outpouring of our prayers ever since – we can all benefit from a simple review of Paul's truthful and practical focus for our prayers?

First Paul urges that "supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for everyone." How many times have we read that in the past and really not been struck by anything? But when I read this simple phrase this week, I was almost overwhelmed by the two words: **FOR EVERYONE. Before the devastation of Sept. 11th – "for everyone" didn't seem to really grab our attention. But what a phenomenal vision & mission God has given his church in just those two words: **PRAY FOR EVERYONE.****

Just in New York City alone those words "for everyone" no longer just include the rescue workers and thousands of grieving families ... but now "for everyone" also includes some 10,000 people in Manhattan who are essentially homeless ... now "for everyone" includes utility workers who must repair vastly damaged power & technology systems ... now "for everyone" includes volunteer workers who may be needed for more than a year in the city ... now

“for everyone” includes everyone in this nation who is being asked to care and to unite and to give not only for days ... but for months & maybe years.

But those two simple words not only refer to NYC, Washington DC or Pennsylvania, “for everyone” also includes prayers for grandpas & grandmas and mothers & fathers and sisters & brothers of thousands who have died or been hurt in this tragedy. “For everyone” also includes prayers for our airline industry & our financial markets & our military personnel ... “for everyone” esp. includes the millions of children in the world whose trust in the security and safety of daily living has been tremendously trampled by this tragedy.

And yes, God’s mission for these two words also goes well beyond the boundaries of our own nation. Obviously, we need to pray: “God Bless America;” but we have already learned this past week if we want to be blessed as a country, then we must ask God to bless other countries to be more understanding and more willing to support us. Never before have we needed a world community to come forward and respond to our prayers **TO WIPE OUT TERRORISM of every kind. “O God our Father, we pray **FOR EVERYONE** in this world to unite against the demonic evil of terrorism ... and we also pray that no further eruption of this horror will be seen anywhere in the world.”**

Secondly, Paul urges that our prayers and supplications be focused for “kings and all who are in high positions.” Consistent with his advice in Romans 13, Paul is urging that we pray for those who hold public office – whether that be a political or religious office. Last November, only around 50% of Americans went to the polls to vote; thankfully, those who did can now offer prayers of thanksgiving for the leaders that we elected. As horrible as this event has been – I hope it has awakened us to the importance of those who hold “offices of high authority.” I can’t imagine the turmoil and anxiety that have been a part of our president’s life for almost two weeks. The same is true for probably all leaders –national, international, & local, esp. NYC. Whether we want to admit it or not – our “peaceable life” often rests in the hearts and minds of these leaders. Is it any wonder that Paul singles them out for our special prayers.

And now we must pray for the very best in decision-making by all these leaders, especially our president. We must pray that their decisions will reflect God’s character and his will; we pray that there will be justice for all evil doers but we also pray that there will not be more injustice for any innocents of our lands. Like the little boy in our opening story – we all know our natural tendency: **WE WANT TO GET EVEN WITH THOSE WHO HURT US or THREATEN US. Scripture is very directive on this point. Romans 12:19 along with 25 other texts sums it up in six words: “‘Vengeance is mine’ says the Lord.” God calls upon us to pray for justice ... to seek, find & eliminate the terrorists and their ilk ... but not to pray for revenge lest we become responsible for murdering more innocent life. What a mission of heavy-duty prayer God has given us due to the complexity of decision-making for all leaders. “God our Father, please give all leaders your heart and your mind in their deliberations.”**

But there are also “high offices” that are religious. And I am not referring here to popes or bishops. I am referring to any religious leaders who are responsible for overseeing the public sphere. We have already had a religious voice or two that has blamed the terrorist attack on liberal thinkers and movements. We really need to pray that God’s spirit will prevent another Viet Nam era of divisiveness & confusion among the faithful. God must not be politicized with one ideology or another. As our text states today, God “desires everyone to be saved and to come to a knowledge of his truth.” As Christians, we have seen that truth of God fully revealed for the whole world in Jesus Christ. He is the greatest advocate for love, compassion and understanding among all people. So as John 3:16 illustrates, our challenge as religious leaders is to offer a chain of prayers for all people of the world, day in and day out – a chain of prayers that links us to God and to each other in a spirit of saving love, mercy and concern. Likewise, our prayers really need focus upon that host of religious leaders who now have the challenging task of ministering to thousands of families who have lost loved ones in this tragedy. “O Lord, be with all your servants who must proclaim your eternal promise of saving love to those who have been torn away from that love in this world.”

Finally, Paul urges that we pray for a “peaceable life of all godliness and dignity” not only in our nations, but especially in our communities of faith. The outpouring of people to churches recently is a powerful sign that everyone is looking for a more Godly & “peaceable life.” After seeing the hands of Satan on Sept. 11th - people are now looking for the heart and soul of godliness and dignity. As has been said by Pastor Ferne and many others this year – Glenwood has a proud and vibrant history of 100 years of being God’s beacon of love, dignity and peaceable life for this community.

So we must diligently pray that people experience a “peaceable life” when we gather together in this place. We know that there have been fractures in that “peaceable life” in the last few years. Now we must pray that those past fractures be buried forever. This house of prayer must never become a place where terror and hurt and pain are felt by anyone. If there is even the slightest harboring of bad feelings – we must ask God to deliver EVERYONE in this house of prayer from those demons. God will simply not allow any spirit of harm or terror to express itself within his body. Every spirit of separation and hurtfulness has already been crucified with Christ on Calvary so that God’s true spirit of mercy and forgiving grace might always rise in this house.

“O Lord our God, we can’t change the devastation of Sept. 11th – but we can and we will be your house of “peaceable life,” where godliness and dignity are always present. Your Son has already paid the ransom for all our human hatefulness – so fill our time here with your renewed life of mercy, kindness, gentleness and self-control. We pray for deliverance from any form of terrorism – especially terrorism of the tongue. Bless America ... Bless the Whole World ... and especially Bless Us “not to seek to get even,” but to seek your peace which passes all human understanding.” Amen.