

TRINITY VI
Redeemer Lutheran Church - Milwaukee
July 9, 1972

"DYING TO LIVE"

(Romans 6:4) "We were buried with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

"Do you renounce the devil, and all his works, and all his ways?" If so answer: 'I renounce them.' "I RENOUNCE THEM."

You and I make this confession of faith for the length of our days. As Christians we daily renounce idolatry, murder, resentment, envy, insult, slander, jealousy, exploitation, adultery and the numerous other works of evil. We renounce them because we are daily "DYING TO LIVE" -- that is, dying to sin so that we can live anew for Christ.

Baptism is the initiation of "dying to live." In baptism we are launched into the lifetime process of "dying to live." We are only baptized once. And those baptismal promises experience constant neglect. Greed and evil temptations replace them. We then find ourselves alienated from God and our fellow men. We desire reunion.

And so we must die to our greed and evil in order to live renewed -- reborn -- regenerated -- yes, redeemed. This is the Christian process and struggle in life. It never ends as long as we breathe the breath of God. It's always beginning -- because it's a constant "dying to live!"

But that sounds unbearable -- almost masochistic! No, not at all. But we know it's not easy either. Yet we know above all that "dying to live" is the ONLY WAY to a purposeful, meaningful, and eternally fulfilling life. That statement could sound overly pompous, but we see it as truth. But is this really truth or only our religious fantasy?

How do we find such fulfillment in life through our constant "dying?" Do we really experience a rebirth -- a newness of life? Let's examine our experience and see if we can magnify this truth.

How do we initiate this fulfilling-"dying" process. What's our first step? Quite simply, it's called REPENTANCE. Yes, we Christians believe in repenting.

Repentance is our action of turning away from our evilness and returning to our Godliness. It is cremating the garbage in our lives and rekindling the Holy Spirit. It is burying our evil self, so that we can be resurrected a new self.

It was for this reason that the early church practiced TOTAL IMMERSION in baptism. The WHOLE BODY was "buried" beneath the water so that the person actually felt death around him. And as he sprang to the surface, he experienced the rebirth of his life. Symbollically, he was "dying to live." We might truly often miss this significance with our sprinkling system.

Further, the early church built its structure facing the east. Why? Because then its worship life paralleled the rising sun. That was a reminder of God's constant renewing gifts -- it motivated these Christian communities to constant repentance and renewal.

In concept and practice REPENTANCE has been a top priority of our Christian witness and tradition. It is our initial step in the process of "dying to live" -- that process leading to real fulfillment. Yet many today including some Christians find little need for old-time repentance. Is it any wonder that we hear of so much violence, disillusionment, and anxiety in our age.

As we look to the Gospel text for this day Jesus equates anger, insult, and slander with murder. And then we look at our society and world! International war and anger. Racial insult. Constant marital resentment. Political divisiveness and slander. Family chaos and disrespect. Authority rebellion.

A LITTLE repentance might lead to a LOT OF fulfillment. . . A LOT OF NEWNESS OF LIFE. A little burying of personal greed and resentment might lead to a lot of resurrected dead lives. Yes, "Dying to Live" through repentance does lead to a newness of life.

Secondly, in "dying to live" we Christians SACRIFICE. We, like Jesus of Nazareth, risk our lives and possessions because we KNOW that our giving will yield for OURSELVES and OTHERS a priceless bonus. Sacrifice is NOT JUST hearing the word of Christ, but following THE WAY of Christ.

We've all heard and said: "I'm just DYING to get out of here." Or from a teenage daughter: "I'm just dying to go out with him."

That daughter will let nothing interfere with her "dying" desire "to go out with him." As she uses the word "dying" itself, she

is saying she will SACRIFICE almost anything to get a date with that guy. She'll go out of her way to accidentally bump into him. She run the risk of even looking obnoxious just to make herself very obvious to him.

In "dying to live" as a Christian, that's the same kind of sacrifice that we make to follow Christ. If necessary we'll go out of our way to find that person in need of love and forgiveness. We'll even risk looking obnoxious just to make sure that Christ's resurrected love is being experienced through us.

That's the blueprint for Christian "dying." It meant physical death for Jesus. For us it could mean the same, but in all likelihood, it will mean less. But we know that it is NOT EASY. Sacrifice hurts. Dying to self-arrogance always hurts.

Yes, dying to live through SACRIFICE has never been without pain -- but we know that as we have tried giving in this way, that we have seen the newness of life that follows.

Finally, in "dying to live" we are in Christ. That's a nice pious phrase, but what does it mean. Martin Thornton says that being in Christ is "not as a pebble in a box but as a branch on a tree." In other words being in Christ is being INSEPARABLE from God's love and forgiveness. So we are in constant contact with him who sustains and renews our journey through time.

Being in Christ is NO isolation from struggle or temptation or even failure. But we have assurance that even under these forces of life we are still loved, accepted and forgiven.

vitality

How important it is for us to remember this as the Body of Christ. As we have died through repentance and sacrifice with Christ, we now live in Christ and make his love and forgiveness a reality, especially for those who have failed or now despair in their struggle.

Do we see how important being the baptized community in Christ really is?? We are the sustaining body for the repentant prisoner. We are the serving body which must be broken to feed that hungry man who stinks because no one has cared LONG ENOUGH to show him anything else. It's so easy to call a man a tramp -- but so hard to show him Christ with a passing glance of disgust.

Being in Christ does not make us any better than any so-called tramp. Our Christian faith and baptism cannot be reduced to such simplistic moralism.

Being in Christ, rather, enables me to die to idolatry, and anger, and insult, and resentment, and all the other evils. And when I have died to those evils, I am free to live a new kind of life. I am no longer carrying any guilt or garbage from my past actions -- I am free to start anew -- to live to love, to forgive, to care again.

even

I can now turn to that person who has resented and been jealous with me -- and I can say, brother, wife, son, friend, I love you and really care for you. I accept you even though I reject your resentment and jealousy of me. I want to help you get beyond that anger and resentment -- will you please give me a chance???"

That kind of word for one another is the WORD of God.

That kind of word for one another is the love and forgiveness of holy baptism.

We have been buried with him by that baptism into death, so that we can be raised with him by the glory of the Father.

In that process of "dying to live," we REPENT - we SACRIFICE.- and we LIVE IN CHRIST, because we know the fulfillment this process brings and we desire to walk in that newness of life.

In CHRIST, you and I have died so that we can live renewed. Let's live that way for at least another week.

Amen.

Almighty and most merciful God and Father:
We thank you that you have graciously
preserved and extended your Church,

and that you have granted us, your children,
the new birth in Holy Baptism, and received
us as heirs to your kingdom;

We humbly beseech you to defend and keep
us in this grace, that we may never depart
from you but may always live according to
your will and receive the fullness of your
promise in your eternal kingdom.

Daily turn us away from the corruption of
our sin; and as we turn back to you,
strengthen us to share your loving kindness
with the hardened hearts of this age.

O Lord, you have called us to be the living
instruments of your grace -- we have your
word of love, enable us to share it with
those suffering and separated from our own
community of faith:

Give us clarity of vision to see heartache
and suffering throughout your creation.
Bind us together in compassion so that we
have the strength in this Body of Christ
to sustain each other even in the
midst of evil and tragedy. May we do this
in the name of him who came to reveal your
eternal love, namely Jesus Christ, who has
taught us to pray:

PENTECOST VI
July 14, 1974 - Church of the Master - Troy

"LOOKING AHEAD"

We might call our present era - the nineteen seventy-~~four~~ nostalgics. Fashions, interests, music, advertising, furnishings and so much more all seem to be reaching out to recapture the good-~~old-days~~.

Everybody is buying antiques. Housewives spend their pasttime refinishing old furniture. Many garages have become workshops for Model-T's or Plymouth roadsters. I even saw in the paper this week that straps have returned to heels.

Yes, no doubt about it - the "in-thing" today is reverence for the past. . . . a real respect for the traditions that have given us the present.

And how do I feel about this? Great!! I am truly grateful that Americans are renewing their appreciation for ^{re-cycled} material things. Our age has too long suffered from a throw-away mentality. In an age of abundance, people truly need to reorient their values toward respecting all creations - whether man-made or God-made.

Moreover, we all need to touch base with our history. We need to know our roots - for we all know that there is individual and corporate stability in having a meaningful identity. Man needs to love the past - he needs to feel that he has some brick and mortar in its foundation. This is all good and necessary.

But, we always live with the danger of allowing the past to claim our present ~~allegiance~~. That is, we can easily move from nostalgia to glorification of the past -- to the point where we worship something that has no meaningful influence on our present existence. In other words, we ^{often} commit ourselves to a past event, person, or thing NOT BECAUSE IT HELPS US TO GROW OR SERVE one another now, but because we can then avoid ^{dealing} with our present circumstances.

This type of commitment to the past is *idolatrous imprisonment*. It is being bound for the sake of being bound with no useful or re-creative purpose for the present. In today's Gospel, Jesus uses three examples to illustrate how enslavement to the past CAN become idolatrous, empty living rather than life-giving. These three examples provide the spade-work for this day's sermonic cultivation. *Servant hood*

We encounter first a man who says to Jesus: "I will follow you wherever you go." How about that for enthusiasm! And yet, can't you just see Jesus musing to himself before he gives his answer - "Mmm - such an eager chap - all this emotional enthusiasm - I wonder if this chap really knows what it's gonna be like as my disciple -- he probably thinks he'll be prancing around in the chancel of some temple incensing the altar seven times aday."

Yes, I'm certain that Jesus had musings similar to this before he gave the answer: "Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lie down and rest." His answer was a challenge - a claim that discipleship meant more than offering sacrifices in the synagogue - discipleship would mean more than comfortable (or sweaty) fellowship in the temple. Christian commitment, says Jesus, is more than a ritual in a fixed place.

Do you feel the bite in Jesus' response to this well-intentioned prospect? This man wanted to join Jesus' church - he wanted to be a member of Christ's church. And what does Jesus say to him? Does he say, sure - come on in - me and the twelve really have a great life. No, instead he gives this man a little reality therapy - he enables the man to realize that Christian discipleship demands expression wherever the disciple finds himself -- NOT ONLY in a fixed structure on the Sabbath.

Jesus knew that this man may have been enslaved to the Jewish cultural traditions -- and that

meant that ^{his} religious life was essentially limited to ritualistic practices of the past - limited to the esoteric liturgies of a beautiful temple.

Jesus asks us today to evaluate our own discipleship and motivations for following him. He's asking us: How wide are the boundaries of our ministry? Are they confined to a building on Sunday morning? Is our discipleship more than making a good impression with our physical structure?

^{a culture Christianity}
He's asking us: How much of our ministry is devoted to meeting the human needs of the church?

He's asking us: Do our prospective members understand the ^{full} dimensions of Christian commitment?

He's asking us: Is our ministry characterized by God's love for all people or by man's love for all things?

A funeral director friend of mine illustrates a response to Jesus' question. This friend often complained to me that it was really tough to compete in his business. I asked him why. He said it meant getting a ^{new} Cadillac hearse every two years - refurnishing every five years - renovating the exterior every three years - etc. etc. His whole long list did not include a need for improvement in compassionate ministry to the grieving families.

His priorities - his commitment was oriented to the cultural traditions of the past. This man had placed a contingent clause on his response to his Lord -- he had stated: I will follow you wherever you go as long as my commitment to you does not interfere with the established traditions of funeral practice.

We all know how tempting it is to place "riders" and contingent clauses on our Christian discipleship. Thank God he forgives us for being diluted disciples / today he again calls us to the fulness of our commitment.

But - then there's that second response of Jesus: "Let the dead bury their own dead. You go

and preach the Kingdom of God." This almost sounds like Jesus is telling us to forget about burying our loved ones. This is hardly the case. Jesus and his culture found themselves in total accord with the proper disposal of the dead.

His statement here is simply to challenge the ~~man's~~ man's orientation in life. What he is asking is this: Who are you living for? Are you living for your past relationships, or are you sharing my love and glory with your fellowmen who YET LIVE now?!?

This question was much more meaningful in my last pastorate. Dealing with many senior citizens every day enabled me to see how many of them were still clinging to past relationships. Continually I heard such things as: "My dear one has been dead for ten years and that's when life stopped for me." In essence, many of these people were enslaved to a relationship that had died. They were not free to serve themselves or anyone else. For them, God was limited to their past relationship.

And so Jesus here is challenging us! Do we believe his promise? "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

Our presence here means that we affirm this resurrection promise. So we need not remorsefully cling to past relationships. They are in God's hands - hopefully, we can just leave them there. And so Jesus challenges us here by saying in essence: I'm not worried about what you're doing for the dead - but what are you doing for the living?!?

Finally, the third man says: "I will follow you sir; but first let me go and say good-bye to my family." And Jesus responds: "Anyone who starts to plow and then keeps looking back is of no use for the Kingdom of God." One might be tempted here to think that Jesus is discouraging cordial family relationships. Hardly the case.

In reality -

Jesus here reminds us of one thing we all have in common - once we look back, we recognize our failures. Not one of us has lived up to even what we expect of ourselves, to say nothing about what others expect of us - and we are so far removed from WHAT GOD HOPES FOR US. So, to look back - even to look back within the family - is only to see the judgment of failure.

And that's o.k. to recognize - but TO LOOK BACK is often to be controlled by our failures. Most of us have had this experience. We keep looking back at our own failures and mistakes OR at the failures or mistakes of someone else AND IN THE PROCESS we soon are incapable of rising above this hopelessness. *caused by them.*

And so - to look back - is most often TO BEAT OURSELVES or OTHERS for the mistakes that have been made in the past.

My Christian friends, the grace - mercy - and forgiveness of God enables you and me to have a faith that looks ahead. Our commitment is not to the past. Yesterday's accomplishments and failures are behind us as memories. We can celebrate with joy the good memories. We can learn from the failures of the bad memories.

But in either case, we cannot serve God or our fellowmen if we are looking backward. Today, through the Gospel, Jesus again reminds us that this and every day is a new day which the Lord has made FOR OUR BENEFIT, NOT FOR OUR DESPAIR. This is a new day to be forgiven - and to forgive. A new day to receive and to offer mercy. A new day to live out our commitment to the ministry of the man from Nazareth. Yes, this is a new day to follow - to follow Christ's example.

He calls upon us to do this in the here and now - not as another exercise of nostalgia, but as a sign of our priority - commitment to the will of God.

Amen

*Our
Action
is presently
in this
predic-
ament.*

PENTECOST VI

Luth Church of the Master, Troy
7-18-76

"YOU CAN DEPEND ON IT!"

"Jesus took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha, kum,' which means, 'Little girl! Get up, I tell you.'" Mark 5:41

The healing miracles of Jesus have offered countless thousands of Christians measures of hope -- but have equally misled many others. Far too often you and I have made out of these stories a purpose not intended by them.

And from this mistaken identity, many have made a logical jump thereby falsifying the purpose of faith and Christianity.

For instance, on the basis of healing miracles, some believe that through faith the Christian is kept free from blemish, pain, or suffering death.

Others think that their faith delivers them from catastrophe or natural disaster. Still others think that their measure of faith (which is really morality) will be directly related to the severity of physical pain or suffering.

It is true that many devout Christians are kept free from physical suffering and natural disaster. But just as true is the fact that many devout Christians also suffer great physical ailment and disaster.

The purpose of faith (trust in God), then, is not that we are given PERFECT PHYSICAL HEALTH BECAUSE OF OUR BELIEF -- but rather, faith's purpose is to keep us united in love to God and each other - trusting Him in times of affliction and still serving others at the same time.

The healing miracles have been given to us-- and were performed by Jesus so that we would know without a doubt that HE HAD THE POWER OF GOD TO DO ALL THINGS. He was more than a good teacher - he was God incarnate on earth.

He healed and brought back to life so that all people would know that he is the Lord of history -- and that they could depend upon it. He healed so that all humankind would remain one with the Father.

Somehow - over the centuries - the church has held out that *good* health is one of the main aims of the faith.

Granted, we all want to be well - and God desires that for us. But, as Creator, he has given us a body and a brain -- and they are subject to wear and tear like anything else - subject to deterioration and disease.

In short, it's impossible to have physical life without suffering. We are not robots or disembodied spirits. We are complex human beings-- and being such, trouble and suffering is inevitable.

The question of faith IS NOT -- shall we suffer? but rather - how shall we ^{endure} suffering? Faith is not a pill that softens pain and distress -- but rather, a trust in God which enables us to endure pain and suffering with HOPE.

The whole purpose of Christian belief -- and of Jesus' miracles -- is and was to keep humankind united with God even under the most severe trouble and discouraging times.

That sounds good. But how is it accomplished? How can we depend on it -- on the God who has purposed it? Quite simply - God has provided vehicles which reinforce our trust in him and his way.

First, he has established healing ministries - hospitals, doctors, and even amidst this vehicle some faith healers. Their purpose is to try to restore the person to a fulness of personhood-- physically, mentally, & spiritually.

And they are not treating the whole person if they are only treating his physical symptoms. As part of treatment, every doctor should be

to say two things to every patient -- one, that he and his ability are finite; and two, that the patient is finite. That would at least be a beginning to WHOLE TREATMENT of sickness.

It is in this healing ministry arena that our prayers and hopes are offered to encourage the sick -- reminding them of God's desire to heal. For part of God's healing power is the power of encouragement.

But in this arena, we must remember that even prayer is not the final authority -- life's final pulse beat is beyond the scientific test tube and the prayer book. God's hands ultimately welcome his children unto himself. And OFTEN, why one lives and one dies REMAINS A MYSTERY FOR ALL OF US. And that's where it must remain-- A MYSTERY - without blame or accusation at God or anyone else.

Beyond this arena, God has established a healing community - a family which is called upon to support so that suffering might be endured. This community - is the church.

Again, we must be clear -- belonging to the church does not wipe away pain. Being baptized or a good church member hardly guards us against physical weakness or disease.

That's not God's purpose for the church. Rather, he has established this body to be a source of support for the TIME OF TROUBLE -- and that includes all of us. Whether afflicted by sin or human crises, the church is to be present to relieve guilt and wipe away the tears.

Again, this past week members of this congregation were given opportunities TO BE THE SUPPORTIVE BODY OF CHRIST. To give new life when death had taken it away. To be that body that shares tears while it helps heal losses.

By and large, many tried to be that body. But as long as God calls me to be leader here, we must come closer to what God really expects of us.

We must work more diligently to really know

one another. For it is truly embarrassing -- to have callers phone and be told that they did not know one of their fellow Christians from this household of God. Especially disheartening when a dedicated servant like Ken Allison dies.

It is truly a judgment upon us when such things are said. And God only knows -- he has set aside one time to get to know one another -- and if for no other reason, that's an important ~~reason~~ reason for worship.

Likewise, as a healing community, we live by God's love, not the world's fears. It is never easy to share another's loss -- esp. when it's close to a recent loss of your own. But that's still the task of the Christian.

God realizes that there is a time for weeping due to our past losses. But as we trust in him, he calls us to stop feeling sorry for ourselves, and to start helping the ones who are presently walking the valley of the shadow of death -- or whatever valley.

Yes - this is the nature of the church -- the healing community of God.

But beyond the arenas of the healing ministries and communities, God has yet established the ultimate power that man can depend upon - the promise of the resurrection. And you and I can depend upon it.

Yes - this is the final word on the will of God. It is his will that we should be well and whole. But he has established many ways of healing. Some conditions are healed through treatments. Some through surgery. Others through a change of climate. Still others are mysteriously healed in answer to prayer.

And then, there are some CONDITIONS, and ultimately ALL CONDITIONS, that God heals ONLY through the power of the resurrection. And that we can depend upon - for that is the ultimate purpose of our faith.

AMEN

PENTECOST VI

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

July 16 & 19

"TOUGH TALK"

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."
Matt 10:34

Every conscientious Christian has read these words from Matthew's gospel and been set back on his/her heels. As many times as I have read them and used them in Bible studies -- I find them equally harsh the next time I encounter them.

Obviously - with malice not intended - many a Christian has used them TO SUPPORT violence when Jesus' never had that intent whatsoever. I have heard well-meaning Christians often use this text to support a strong hawk position relative to war. Equally so -- I have heard Christians who are having family problems use this text to justify their unhappiness and claim "that's just the way it is in the domestic lives of good Christians."

I would not be so naive as to claim to have the perfect understanding of the text -- but you can be sure that the ones I have mentioned were not intended by our Lord.

If there is ever a text which demands that we begin by looking at the context in which it was originally shared -- this is that one!

Jesus had just called the disciples and was now preparing to send them to evangelize a Jewish people. If there was ever a people who looked to their past traditions for the truth -- it was this people. They were a people who expressed religion in terms of tradition and ceremonial codes; they were a people who were bound to the past even if it only had a minimal meaning in the present.

It was under these circumstances that God did something very new and radical for his people -- he gave them a new foundation for their future in the person of a man, Jesus Christ. In this one act of creation, God told his people he was starting all over again -- no longer would ceremonial laws and traditions take precedent over their lives. NOW - all that was wrapped up in the presence of this one man -- this Messiah, called Jesus.

God was ushering in a new era; he was distilling hundreds of years of tradition and thought and philosophizing and teaching ALL INTO ONE PERSON. And he was saying to his people -- now I want you to give total allegiance to this man -- he is greater than your priests, your rabbis, your wisdom writers and your miracle workers -- he is greater than all of them together. In fact, he is the very presence of my being on earth.

With this context - I hope you can better see why Jesus said "he had come to bring a sword." Israel was deeply entrenched in her ceremonial past -- and the only Messiah she wanted was a *royal* ruler who would give her instant peace.

But instead of making promises of an instant peace, Jesus was telling Israel that she must sever herself from past traditions and traumas. If she wanted Peace, Jesus said, she must cut herself loose from old traditions, old legalisms, old understandings of religion, old parochialisms, old forms of selfishness, etc. etc.

Is it any wonder that Jesus pictured his ministry and that of the twelve TO BE LIKE A SWORD. Their ministry was the sword of decisiveness between the old and the new -- between the stagnancy of tradition and the vitality of love and forgiveness.

Is it now possible for you and me to see why the ministry of Christ would set man against father and daughter against mother and that there would be conflict within households. It should be obvious

that Jesus' motive was not to create domestic turmoil. But because he stood for a whole new mentality of corporate religious life -- he knew what the results would be. Families would have to make choices-- either him, or remaining with the old traditions. And these choices would lead to divisions -- because many would reject God's presence in Christ.

Many of us have read of seen "Fiddler on the Roof." In a small way the whole matter was illustrated in that movie/book. Tevye, the father, says he will disown his daughter if she breaks with the law and tradition of her family. It was obvious that Tevye believed that the legacy of tradition was of greater significance than the power of love between his offspring. Conflict results when Tzeitel chooses love over tradition.

History reflects this ongoing struggle between Christ and religious culture. Religious culture always seeks to replace the authority of Christ-- as it did before the advent of the Reformation. It was the sword of Christ that Martin Luther used in the 16th century. Church and culture had become bed-partners; the church had lost sight of Christ's supremacy and was seeking to live off its own narrow traditions, its own greed and power, and of course, its corruption.

There is no doubt that the Reformation caused turmoil in families. There were those who sided with Luther; there were those who remained loyal to the establishment of the day. And just as Jesus said - man against his father, daughter against her mother, because there is no neutrality when responding to the call of Christ.

The sword of Christ is needed in every age, because every age seeks to replace Christ with its own gods -- whether religious gods or otherwise. Obviously - the issues of tradition and ceremonial codes have not become our gods today; neither have the issues of the Reformation.

But Jesus directs this "tough talk" our way as well because we too must be cut away from anything that has replaced him. We must ask ourselves: What have we made the source of security for life OTHER THAN CHRIST??

For some today - their whole security system is based on the philosophy "ANYTHING GOES." As a nation, we have suddenly become obsessed with the security of nuclear weaponry. Some religious groups today are making absolute morality and censorship the whole basis of Christian faith.

Obviously - all these issues are important, but they are not the basis of our religious faith and security. And that's why Christ says that he has come with a sword -- to surgically remove anything which has replaced his centrality in our lives.

The sword of Christ, like the surgeon's scalpal, only attacks that which is diseased. Like the surgeon's scalpal which seeks to remove the powers of death caused by cancer, infection, and atrophy; the sword of Christ seeks to remove the powers of death like dishonesty, jealousy, greed, indifference, legalism, and anything else that seeks to cheapen or destroy human relationships. Jesus intent is never to destroy us or condemn us, but to cut out the old so that we might have newness of life.

The ancient Israelites expected a Messiah who would give them a free lunch -- an easy peace, a peace without personal effort or responsibility. In a sense - they wanted a welfare king. Instead God gave them a Messiah with a double-edged sword.

One edge offered the assurance of salvation; but the other edge cut away the false notions of religion. According to that edge - religion was not merely saying ceremonial words or doing ceremonial deeds. Faith in God meant living day to day with a commitment to personal sacrifice and responsibility.

It was personal sacrifice - NOT
empty ceremonial sacrifices of animals on altars

This does not mean giving up everything and becoming a monk. But it does mean giving and expending the self LAVISHLY for the good of Christ's kingdom on earth.

The principle of sacrifice is basic to life and the core of religion. No business is built without an owner's sacrifice and hard work. No athletic mastery is achieved without sweat, strain, and constant conditioning. No church has ever fulfilled Christ's mission without its people laying down their lives in service and love. To gain a crown, there must be a cross.

Dr. Ray Ragsdale in his book, What Jesus Promised shares a classic illustration of life without the cross: It is a letter from lover to beloved:

Darling, I love you. My love is like a red, red rose that blooms for you alone. It is like the nectar gods. It is my soul's delight. Because of it I would travel to the ends of the earth for you. I would dare the greatest dangers. I would fight my way to your side though giants should oppose me. Through storm and flood and fire I would persevere to reach you. Accept this as the expression of my undying love.

Yours forever,

P.S. If it doesn't rain tonight, I'll be over.

Like the ancient Israelites - this lover had all the traditional words. He made all the right promises -- but he wasn't willing to follow through and live them. He wasn't willing to pay the price of allegiance to Christ.

We live in a world with promises and promises and empty words of tradition. Jesus came into this same world and fulfilled the promise and tradition of love. He calls us to follow him faithfully.

He offers us his sword - not as a weapon of death but as a scalpel to heal diseased life. He comes

amidst us to cut away those traditions that are empty words -- those promises not yet fulfilled -- those failures not yet forgotten. He cuts away anything that clogs up his way, his life, and his truth of love. And he does all of this IN ORDER THAT WE MIGHT WALK IN HIS NEW WAY OF LIFE.

amen

PENTECOST VI
Hope Luth Church, Toledo
July 8 (Thurs.) July 11 (Sunday)
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

1982

"A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH"

And Jairus besought Jesus saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." And Jesus went with him. ... While Jesus was still speaking, there came from the ruler's house some who said, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?" But ignoring what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe."

There is nothing more alarming -- nothing more threatening than to watch one of our children suffering a severe illness. As a young boy, I was plagued for several years with frequent, violent abdominal attacks. They became so severe that I had to resort to rolling around on the floor in utter agony. During those moments, I remember the frightened faces of my parents. I also remember their great relief when our family doctor would arrive at the front door ... again making one of us many house calls during those years.

Today specialization and medical demands have made house calls nigh impossible. But when facing a life or death situation, there is still tremendous relief in the healing hands of a great physician. Such was the situation Jairus brought to Jesus. Jairus was a synagogue ruler (like our Council president today); this was usually a position held by a person of great wealth and power. But Jairus, like all other fathers and mothers, came to the realization that his power and wealth were impotent to make his daughter well. In desperation he turns to Jesus and asks him to make a house call. Characteristic of the compassion of a physician, Jesus leaves the crowd and heads for Jairus' house.

But the drama intensifies. They had barely begun their journey when Jairus' servants arrive with bad news: his daughter has already died. The urgency of life or death has now passed, at least from Jairus' point of view. For him, there's no reason to go on. His servants even express that point of view telling him "not to trouble the Teacher any further."

Jesus could have expressed his condolences at that point and left it there. But not so. He needed to show Jairus and all of us that God's way is life-giving ... even after the encounter of death. And so he interrupts and ignores Jairus' servants and tellsuJairus: "Do not fear, only believe."

Can you imagine how Jairus must have felt about those words: "Do not fear, only believe." What kind of pious platitudes was Jesus trying to pass off? How was Jairus supposed to have hope when he already knew that his daughter was dead?? What was he now suppose to believe about this physician, Jesus??

Well, to know this great physician, Jesus Christ, was to know that he saw life as more than mere physical existence. In Essence, Jesus was saying to Jairus, you have one of two alternatives to choose from in facing your loss: 1) you can quit; you can give up on life, or 2) you can perservere; you can carry on showing your trust in God's continuing care.

Obviously, Jesus not only confronts Jairus ... he confronts all faithful followers with this same faith perspective; He's forcing us to deal with life's toughest questions: What do we really believe about God and life and death?? How much power do we really give God?? Do we only see God as a quick cure magician ... or do we see him for what he really is -- the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, the creator and ultimate ruler of ~~th~~ existence.

Jairus was facing the same circumstance that you and I have encountered many times in our lives: how do we deal with loss and still have hope?? And we all know that's no easy dilëmma to face. In fact when confronted by the situation, most of us deal with it much like the mature man who encountered the teenager on a high bridge.

The teenager was preparing to jump. The man saw him and yelled, "Why do you want to kill yourself?" The boy responded: "Life just isn't worth living." They began to argue on the spot; finally the man said: Tell you what: Give me five minutes to tell you why life is worth living. Then I'll give you five minutes to tell me why life isn't worth living. If at the end of ten minutes you still want to end your life, I won't stop you."

The teenager agreed. Each spoke their allotted time, and at the end of ten minutes, both men climbed atop the railing and jumped into the river below.

Isn't that the way life often is: given equal time, pessimism seems always to win out over optimism. People seem to want to believe the worst. They want good news, but often act as if life offers only bad news.

Jesus had forced Jairus to face that dilemma head on with the words: "Fear not, only believe." Why should Jairus trust those words, esp. since he already knew that his daughter was dead. He, like most of us, have heard those words many times from our friends: "Don't give up." "Carry on things will get better." "Just try one more time ... he's sure to be faithful this time." We've all heard those platitudes of positive thinking ... and yet so often they just don't work. Positive thinking, as great as it is, just doesn't take away the sting of death or loss.

Of course, Jairus and most of us too often forget that Jesus does not offer the power of positive thinking, at least as we know it in popular forms. Jesus does not offer Jairus human optimism -- he offers divine *HOPE*. . And there is a difference between God's word and the word of the neighbor down the street.

God does not offer empty promises. He is not an advocate of blind optimism. When he says, "Fear not, only believe" he means exactly that. And somehow against all the odds of humanity, Jairus decided to trust God at that moment. He took Jesus' promise seriously, and followed him to the bedside of his daughter. And from that point on we all know what Jesus did.

So what's the point of the miracle story? Is God telling us that if we pray hard enough he will resuscitate our loved ones as Jesus did for Jairus' daughter?? The answer should be obvious: God does not make a routine practice of resuscitation of the dead (*the God uses defibrillators today as fact 5)*

But the resuscitation of Jairus daughter does clearly illustrate the power and perspective of God's promises. First the power. Namely, when God makes a promise, he acts on it. Jesus does not merely say optimistic things to

to Jairus (or any of us) and then not follow through. When Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me even though he die, yet shall he live," that is a promise that can be trusted. When Christ says, "Your sins are forgiven," those aren't words of positive thinking ... those are words of life-giving power. When Jesus says, "Fear not, only believe," he was offering hope that could be trusted.

And that same Jesus Christ /still makes house calls today. He comes into this house and offers hope to each of us through water, wine, bread and the touch of one another. And then he beckons us to extend this house call into our own homes, offices, factories and schools.

Every house call that God makes, whether here or elsewhere, always possesses the same healing power. He always says the same words: "Rise, get up, live your life anew through the power of my love and my promise of forgiving eternal life."

But there is more than power in his promise; there is a perspective in his Word. In the raising of Jairus' daughter we do not have the theme of life after death. Jesus did not perform a resurrection but a resuscitation of life. And there is only one meaning from that: THERE IS LIFE BEFORE DEATH.

That's the real matter of life or death in this world: too often we focus our religious energy upon what happens to us after we die. The miracle of Jairus' daughter forces us to consider what happens before we die. In other words there is always the possibility of being dead before we die. It is the experience of only existing but not really living with purpose.

God's Word is not merely a promise of life after death, it's a Word which gives power to life before we die. To have received a house call from Christ is to be possessed with his kind of love and mercy, optimism and self-affirmation. The miracle of Jairus' daughter offers a faith perspective of loving life on earth as well as life after death. It makes God's Word a reality to celebrate now and not only after death.

This is the kind of good news God shares with each house call at Hope. The church needs to share the miracle of God's love on earth as well as life in heaven. That is regularly

illustrated by newcomers to our church and community. They often feel like the lady who visited a local church in which the pastor's sermon topic was: "Will we know each other in heaven?" After the service nobody spoke to this visiting woman, nobody acknowledged her presence, nobody noticed that she was even there. When she got home she wrote the pastor a short note:

Dear Pastor: Last Sunday I attended your church and listened attentively to your sermon. After what I experienced as a stranger in your congregation, I would suggest that next Sunday you preach on the topic: "Will we know each other here on earth?"

Present

Every day is a matter of life or death, regardless of our health condition. Life is not mere existence, it is the generous gift of God -- to be lived with gusto, and generosity, and mercy and kindness. Part of that life also means there will be loss of life, but that is never the end for any of us. Because we live with the power of divine optimism -- we trust in God's power of eternal life after death, and we live with God's power of love and mercy before death.

And because we have these perspectives of life and death, Life or death is always a matter of GOOD NEWS!

AMEN

24

PENTECOST VI

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

July 19 and 22, 1984

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, ANYWAY?"

"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live this new life."

Romans 6:

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law -- a man's enemies will be the members of his own household."

Matthew 10:34-35

Pastor Robert Hock, who serves in the Orlando Florida area, was the chaplain for the recent LCA convention. His sermons offered numerous illustrations. But one remained in mind for today. It was about an incident that occurred in a grocery store. It's an incident involving a rather mild-mannered man and a couple of irritated housewives.

These two ladies, you see, converged on the check-out counter at the precise same moment with their carts. And they started arguing and pushing as to who would be next to check out. And this man trying to help -- he was a little ahead of them -- he tried to make peace. But no way! The two ladies simply ignored him at first ... and kept on shouting and pushing. But then as he tried to mediate one more time, one of the ladies said: "Hey buster, why don't you mind your own business!" And the other lady, agreeing with the first, chimed in and said, "Yeah, she's right, who do you think you are, anyway?!?"

Utterly humiliated, this man quickly paid the clerk and dashed out for his car.

Some months ago on the "Good Morning America" show, David Hartman was interviewing two prominent psychologists who had some of their male patients with them. And the conversation centered around a growing problem in our society of what is often called, "The Put-Down Syndrome." Like the man in the grocery store, we are forever being "put down." ... reduced many times to little more than a number on a social security card, or a code on a computer. Hence so many suffer terribly

from lack of self-esteem. The two psychologists were saying on the program that the situation had become so acute that thousands of young men in our society were suffering from "Impotence" because of it.

It would appear that there is a great need for a new Reformation in our culture today ... a Reformation for self-esteem and more self-worth in our society. There are so many who are hurting and hungering for affirmation and acceptance. There are so many who are literally "taking their lives" because they just can't believe that anyone else can possibly love them or value them -- NOT EVEN GOD! Marriages shattered, careers destroyed, youth throwing their lives away BECAUSE THEY ARE SUFFERING FROM THE PUT-DOWN SYNDROME!

I don't know what your childhood religion was was like. But I remember mine quite well! It was a religion which basically told me how worthless I was -- how much of a wretch and a worm I really was. It was a religion which emphasized the negatives of life -- don't do this, don't do that, don't go there, don't get involved in that! It was a "put-down religion!" It did not make me feel good about myself ... about my faith ... or about my God. Everything was cast in negatives!

Believe it or not, that kind of religion is still being peddled today. And I might say, very successfully! The churches that are pushing this kind of religion are growing rapidly. It's almost as if many Christians want the "hell scared right out of them." They want to believe they are worthless ... and rotten ... and wretched. Maybe they feel if they get whipped in church then they really don't have to worry too much about what they do outside of church. How strange that our Christian faith has become for many nothing more than a big put-down!!

Well, maybe that's not so strange after all. Maybe that's just another form of human self-righteousness ... of human perfectionism. That's what Jesus was facing in the Jewish establishment of his day. The Law of God's love had been made into a whipping post ... into traditions, and legalisms, and forms of piety, and codes of orthodox conduct, and ceremonial rules and regulations. The Jewish faith had been perverted into a codified system of self-righteousness and external obedience to ceremonial laws. God's love and mercy and compassion had been lost to traditions and taboos of the law. The Jewish faith had become a PUT-DOWN for its own believers!

Human worth ... human value ... human self-esteem ... human love and mercy were no longer the principles of faith. It had become perfect obedience to the ceremonial rules and regulations and traditions. And all these were designed to make the individual feel very worthless, very wretched, very insignificant ... especially in the eyes of God. God's children were not being lifted up BY HIS WORD, but rather they were being PUT-DOWN BY HIS WORD AND THE LEGALISTIC PHARISEES.

It is with that back-drop that Jesus speaks this tough language to his disciples. I have not come to give you an easy peace with this false notion of religion; I have come with a sword TO SEVERE YOU FROM THIS LEGALISM ... THESE OLD TRADITIONS ... this put-down syndrome of ceremonial rules and regulations.

Jesus had come NOT TO ENHANCE this old notion of religion, but to offer a totally new way of life ... a new INTERNAL allegiance to his love and mercy and compassion. Jesus had come to severe us from a religion which puts human fulfillment of the law above the glorious grace and merciful love of God.

Is it any wonder why Jesus' sword would set man against his father, and daughter against mother, and religious conflict within many households. Jesus was calling for a new allegiance to himself -- he was to be at the center of faith and life rather than the old traditions of the law. Giving loyalty to Christ meant giving up loyalty to the old traditions, and legalisms, and all the other self-righteous "put-downs" that had become a part of the faith.

Obviously, following Jesus Christ did not and does not destroy relationships to others. To the contrary, it enriches them! It uplifts and supports our relationships! But following Christ does mean that he is at the center of it all! Everything else becomes secondary! Our jobs, our families, our income and status, our traditions, our laws, our country -- whatever else we would make into our god ... our greatest good -- these are all secondary! Discipleship means that Christ is above all and at the center of everything!

The Jews had made their old traditions ... their ceremonial laws into their god. They were worshipping their traditions. And Jesus said to that kind of faith, I bring the sword of the Gospel! I will severe my own from that kind of false, 'put-down' faith!

All of our Christian history reflects this ongoing struggle between Christ and our religious culture. Religious culture is always seeking to replace the authority of Christ with its own traditions, its own rules/regulations, its own practices. That's what the Lutheran Reformation was all about -- the church had lost sight of God; it was suffocating on its own traditions, and greed, and corruption. Luther brought the sword of Christ down upon the church. And believe me, there were divisions within families -- those who were uplifted by the word of grace, and those who wanted to cling to the old traditions of the past.

The same still happens right here today. When we put traditions, or denominations, or our own interpretations -- whenever we put ourselves at the center of faith rather than Christ ... then the sword of Jesus Christ is needed. NOT TO PUT US DOWN, but to lift us up -- to sever us from our false notion of faith ... to sever us from our selfish "put-down" of others who are different from us ... to sever us from our self-righteousness IN ORDER THAT WE MIGHT BE LIFTED UP BY THE LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST!

In essence, this text is asking us: WHAT SHALL WE DWELL UPON AS GOD'S CHILDREN?? Shall we dwell upon the old traditions? Shall we dwell upon the old ways ... the way we used to do it or the way its always been done? Shall we dwell upon our helplessness and hopelessness and sinfulness and wretchedness?? Shall we dwell upon all the guilt we feel because of yesterday's sins?? Shall we dwell upon "socking it to one another" so that we can all feel worthless and rotten and valueless??

Oh, there's no doubt that we can't avoid our sin -- it stares at us and totally disrobes us of any false pride. There's no doubt about the fact that we desperately need a Savior - namely, Jesus Christ, Our Lord! But should we not dwell upon the fact that we have received that Savior -- and that he loves us and forgives us so much more than we love or forgive ourselves?? Should we not dwell upon the fact that Christ has come, by golly, and he has come to SAVE US AND GIVE US NEWNESS OF LIFE!! HE HAS COME TO LIFT US UP -- NOT TO PUT US DOWN!!

I'll never forget the birth of our two children -- for in birth God truly manifests the miracle of human worth. There I stood at the head of Sue-- watching the doctors frantically

work to stay ahead of Angie and Sarah...watching that miraculous and fascinating event. Finally, the births occurred. And then suddenly the doctor places that little baby right into my arms ... and the tears came flooding down my cheeks as I said so joyously: "Oh my God, this is my child ... and oh how much I love her!!"

My dear friends -- that's the way it is with us and our God -- he loves us so much ... he never wants to "put us down!" That's the good news that God gives us to share with one another: THAT HE CAME INTO THIS WORLD TO LIFT US UP, NOT TO PUT US DOWN! That's why St. Paul says so gloriously in Romans: "Just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too might live in this new life."

Well - the mild-mannered man got out into his car. And he was even shaking a bit remembering those caustic words from that woman: "Who do you think you are, anyway?" And then he began to think -- Who do I think I am? -- I am a worthwhile, loved, forgiven child of God!! I am God's precious child! I am not worthless or valueless ... as those women would make me! I am forgiven! I am loved! I am of great value to God and all of his people!! I am a conquerer through him who loves me ... and not even death will put me down! And celebrating his baptism, this man drove out of the parking lot transformed and whole again!

precious
Who do you think you are, anyway? You are a child^{precious} of God-- loved, forgiven, worthwhile, and of greater value than all the laws and traditions and denominations of all time. So lose yourself in God's love ... because there is no greater worth or value to share!

AMEN

PENTECOST VI
(St. Peter/St. Paul)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
June 26 & 29, 1986
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!"

/One man said_/ "I will follow you wherever you go."
/And another said_/ "Lord, first let me go and bury my
father." /And yet another said_/ "I will follow you, Lord,
but first let me go and say goodbye to my family."

Luke 9:57,59,61

A high percentage of you here this morning are familiar with board meetings. But I'm wondering how many of you have heard about the board meeting in hell. It was called by none other than its chief executive officer - Satan himself. He had called together his senior advisors and put the question straight to them: We need a new strategy for creating havoc on earth! How can we best win the world to our own way of thinking? His advisors thought long and hard.

The first advisor suggested, "Tell them there is no heaven." The second advisor thought he had one better: "Tell them there is no hell." But the third advisor had the real master-strategy for a sinful world: "Tell them there is no hurry!"

Satan's master strategy has always been the same: tell them THERE IS NO HURRY TO USHER IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD. IT CAN WAIT TIL TOMORROW. HASTA MANANA! THERE IS NO URGENCY IN FULFILLING THE WILL OF GOD IN THIS WORLD.

There is a great hurry in this world to be successful, to get to the top, to make the first million, to get my-day-in-the-sun, to arrive culturally and socially, to be in control, in short, "to make it" by the world's standards; but the urgency for God's kingdom ... for his rule ... for his loving-kindness ... for his compassion ... for his forgiving grace ... we can put these off for another day, another year, another lifetime.

A famous Lutheran theologian, a man who has inspired many of us pastors by his prolific writings, confessed recently that he has been an abysmal failure with his own children. "How I wish," he lamented "that when my children were young I had spent less time with my books and more time with my kids." Books can become gods for theologians. Church structures, church committees, & church politics can become gods for pastors. Even dedicated laypeople have been hurrying lately to idolize the golden calves of quotas and congregational autonomy in the new church. And in the process we all miss the most urgent message of God: "I have

called you to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." We're in a big hurry to restructure and revamp the new Lutheran Church; but the tasks of justice, loving-kindness, and humility can wait.

What is it that has the greatest urgency in your life? For what, for whom do you offer your greatest commitment? Do we not see the urgency of justice, of loving-kindness, of humility in this world? Which one of us needs to be reminded of how quickly our children grow up? Which one of us can overlook how time takes its toll in the aging process? Which one of us hasn't known the treasure of love one day only to see it disappear the next day or next week? Which one of us can afford NOT to show our love for God and each other right now - BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE?!? Do we not see the urgency in this most important reality of life? Has Satan's strategy won? Has he made us cold and indifferent to the greatest power ever given??

Sometimes we're like the bashful young man who seemed to be totally hung up in his ability to show affection to his sweetheart. He kept on making excuses. One night he said, "Sweetheart, if only God had given me eight arms like an octopus, then I would wrap them around you and you would finally know how much I really love you." His lover quickly responded: "Don't worry about eight arms. Just make better use of the two that God has already given you!"

There is such an urgent need in this world for the demonstration of our love for God and each other. There is so much talk of love, yet there is so little real demonstration of love. We talk a great line of love in the church; but when we are called to even love and cherish our own members - it is amazing how rejecting and calculating and satanizing we can be! There is a desperate need to demonstrate for one another that we are citizens of the kingdom of God as well as citizens of Toledo.

But this is not the only urgency of our gospel text today. There is an equal urgency for repentance - for a change of lifestyle, for a turnaround from Satanic habits - from greedy, gross, and ungrateful living! Again this week newspaper headlines have brought us the tragic stories of addiction and drug-abuse in our society. We continue to read of multi-million dollar sports heroes who seem to have an insatiable appetite for getting high -- even to the point of killing themselves for a quick fix! What have the heroes of this world become? How low do they have to sink? How many million does it take to satisfy them? How many people do they have to burn, before they will finally admit THAT THEY'VE LOST THE MEANING OF DISCIPLINE AND SELF-CONTROL??

We all know it's not only the sports heroes who are out there burning and hurting people with their insatiable

appetites. There is lurking within all of us a destructive habit or debilitating weakness -- something which causes us to harm ourselves or harm others -- something which we must stop, BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!

We all know the story of a famous man who didn't stop soon enough. Much like you and me, he was a man who saw things pretty much from his own perspective. In his own way, he was a very religious person. But he wanted things to go his way among his group of disciples. And when he saw himself losing - he made his move to be a winner. He betrayed his Lord; he sold out for thirty pieces of silver. Very possibly, he never intended his Lord to die. Very possibly, he had been hurt or rejected by the other disciples. Perhaps he was jealous because he wasn't as close to his Lord as were Peter, James, and John. Whatever it was, there came a time when he finally said: "I'll show them!" Perhaps Judas never really intended to have his Lord crucified! But unfortunately, he did not change BEFORE IT WAS TOO LATE! He sought his will, rather than the will of his Father. And Jesus paid the price!

It is a sad and awful thing to wake up and realize that it's too late -- too late, because you're already pregnant, too late, because the marriage is already lost, too late, because you're already hooked or addicted, too late, because you've already disgraced your family and friends, too late, because the accident has already happened! Too late, because you did not recognize the urgency of changing NOW RATHER THAN LATER!

The gospel message for us today is good news, because Jesus is saying LOUD AND CLEAR: IT'S NOT TOO LATE! Even if we've already blown it, IT'S NOT TOO LATE! Jesus is saying: now is the time to demonstrate God's love and alter our lives from the greed and ingratitude of our society! BUT NOW, BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE AGAIN!

But what kind of response does Jesus often get to this message of urgency? What is the reaction to this grand aspiration of God for his world?

Too many, Jesus says, are like the man who enthusiastically said: "Oh, Jesus, I will follow you wherever you go!" But this man really wanted a life of personal glory - his theme song was "How great I will be; I'll stand up with Jesus and the world will applaud me." Luther called this kind of Christianity "enthusiasm" without THE CROSS. The Enthusiasts were the religious charismatics of days gone by. They are still religious dreamers today ... the ones who get caught up in emotionalism up front, but lack the commitment to follow discipleship to the cross. They are the romanticists who lack the determination to turn their dreams into daily deeds of loving action.

But let us not be too hard on these enthusiasts -- we've all been there at one time or another. Seven years ago I came to Hope Church as an enthusiast -- with great dreams, great hopes, great aspirations for this congregation. And even as we've seen the fulfillment of some of those dreams, I have come to see that the kingdom of God needs more than an enthusiastic leader -- it needs deeply committed followers! I am deeply grateful that there have been several of those in this place! But there is a desperate need for many more. Enthusiasm alone won't do it! It takes hard-core commitment from everyone!

We have certainly learned that so well from the glory crusaders of our day. For forty years, Billy Graham has turned on millions of ENTHUSIASTS by his altar calls. But where are these millions in the trenches of the church? Too often they are like the young man who said he would follow Jesus; they treat religion like a quick fix - an emotional high. They aren't ready to carry their own crosses; to lose themselves as Pastor Bob so eloquently proclaimed last week.

But there are yet other followers "who will be faithful, but only after they have buried their dead." Jesus' response to this man almost sounds crass - "let the dead bury their own dead." After losing my mother ten years ago, it was certainly my Christian and family duty to bury her. In fact, I needed to be there. Certainly, Jesus could not be making "light" of my duty and human need for proper burial of my mother.

Obviously, this is one of many places in Scripture where we dare not be literal. But we must understand the context of this statement. In the Jewish culture, nothing was of greater importance than burial of the dead. And so Jesus was saying: YOU ARE MORE COMMITTED TO THE DEAD THAN YOU ARE TO THE LIVING! Obviously, he does not want us to take him literally, but he does want us to take him seriously!

We often give greater priority to that which is "dead" than to that which is living! We put high value on status and rank, on wealth and income, on clothing and housing, on degrees and dividends -- on things very "dead." But on living relationships of forgiveness and mercy -- we often could care less! Such priorities do not proclaim that we are servants of the kingdom of God! Jesus says, BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE, now is the time to change!

But there is yet a third disciple who responds to the call. But this disciple says that he must first say goodbye to his family before following. Again, Jesus seems harsh in his response -- even as he seemed harsh when he

said: "if any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." Are we to take Jesus literally here? Or is this the way Jesus exaggerates to make the point that we are to seek his kingdom first, and then family will have its proper place?

It's obvious, I hope, that Jesus means nothing should get in the way of making God's reign first in our lives. God's values and God's purposes come first; and when they come first, then love of family will naturally follow.

Possibly a PEANUTS cartoon best illustrates the whole point. Linus comes to Charlie Brown, the manager, as the statistician of their baseball team. He reports, "I've compiled the statistics for our last season; in 12 games we almost scored a run and in 9 games the other team almost didn't score before the first out. In right field, Lucy almost caught 3 balls and once almost made the right play. So, Charlie Brown, our team led the league in "almost."

That's the way many people are with their faith - "almost" disciples -- or as Jesus says, "over-the-shoulder" disciples. People who are always looking back at former loyalties while they're half-heartedly trying to look to the cross with Christ. You and I have often known what it means to be "almost faithful ... almost disciples;" Jesus calls us to be totally with him, not almost with him!

He calls for a total commitment from us because that's the kind of commitment he has given. Jesus Christ has never been "almost" committed to us; he has given us his total life, total commitment, total promise to love and forgive us forever! He never asks for anything that he has not first given!

Never before has there been a more urgent need for this kind of TOTAL COMMITMENT TO CHRIST. Because the world today is suffering from much poverty. There is great material poverty -- never before has there been such a great cavern between the haves and have-nots! There is great emotional poverty -- never before has there been so much terrorism, bitterness, anger and hatred in the world. There is great marital poverty -- never before has there been so much divorce and indifference within our family structure. There is great missional poverty -- never before have so many millions been committed to greed and self-serving mentalities.

Never before has the world more urgently needed the love and justice of Jesus Christ; never before has there been a more urgent time for human repentance. Contrary to Satan and his advisors -- NOW IS THE TIME TO HURRY, BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!

AMEN

PENTECOST VI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
Thursday, June 22; Sunday, June 25, 1989
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"B U T F I R S T . . . "

As they were going along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But this man said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus answered, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Luke 9:57-62

I love pre-marital counseling. It's one of the most significant ways that I get to stay in touch with the values and aspirations of young adults. In some cases, it affords me a relationship that will be cherished for many years. But sometimes it also makes me wonder about the real motives that some couples have for choosing a church wedding.

During the first two sessions - I usually focus upon wedding planning and the joys or anxieties of the couple's relationship. But finally, at the third session we get down to the reality of the church - "why get married in God's place?" And during that session, especially when the couple has no ties to the church -- I will usually ask: How do you view your spiritual life together? How important is the church and its message? How will you share it with your family? Several years ago in a previous parish I asked the bride-to-be: HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR FAITH? She said, "Well, I guess I would call myself 'sort-of-a-Christian' -- you know, like most other Christians ... just 'sort-of-a-Christian.'"

I'm wondering -- is that the way you see your faith -- are you "just sort-of-a-Christian?" Is that the kind of passion you attach to your faith?? Is that the kind of uniqueness that you see in your life as a Christians? After 75 years of faithfulness -- all we can say is that "we're sort-of-Christians." That statement was a real give-away to me; it indicated that everything else was of FIRST IMPORTANCE in that bride's life. Certainly she was not committed to the kingdom of God!

Maybe I can even introduce the point more effectively with another one of my pastoral habits. I am an avid obituary reader!! Are any of you regular obituary readers? When I pick up the BLADE each night -- I almost automatically turn to the Second News Section and read all the obituaries. How's that for a morbid reading routine?? When I go away for a few days for a seminar ... or even when I'm on vacation ...I'll often come back and read nothing in the old papers but the obituaries.

Now obviously you all understand that part of a pastor's call is to be sensitive and compassionate to those who have lost loved ones. I'd like to believe I'm motivated by what Gladstone once said: "show me the manner in which a community cares for its dead, and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty to the highest ideals." I think that's one of my motivations, but there's also a missionary motivation behind this reading habit. I SCAN EVERY OBITUARY TO SEE IF THERE'S A WORD OF WITNESS TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD. Let's face it -- our obituaries are often the final opportunity we get to witness to the importance of God's mission in our lives! I must admit -- many Christians leave an abysmal final witness to the importance of God's kingdom in our lives.

Let me just use this obituary from last week's blade -- it's one of those near-full-column obits ... those are the ones that can really tell the story of God's importance. Here was a man who served the corporate community of Toledo in a deeply commendable way -- 50 years of sacrificial commitment to a leading industry of this community. He was on 28 different boards in leadership positions; he was a member of seven different social clubs in our community. Certainly - here was a man deeply committed to the life, fabric and future of Toledo; he deserves great commendation for his community service. But not one single mention is made of HIS SERVICE TO EXTENDING GOD'S KINGDOM IN THIS COMMUNITY. Obviously, some of his community work did touch upon God's kingdom ... but there was no direct discipleship from his life for the kingdom ... no direct effort to give God the ultimate praise and glory. At least it wasn't mentioned in the obituary. So what's the final impression from this man's life: HE WAS A GREAT MAN OF THE WORLD, BUT ONLY SORT-OF-A-CHRISTIAN!!

Jesus Christ has a real conflict with "sort-of-Christians" ... with disciples who put everything else first, and the work of the kingdom last. In today's text, Jesus addresses his would-be followers with a simple but total commission: "FOLLOW ME." And the response he gets is ... "O.K., BUT FIRST I MUST ACCUMULATE ENOUGH FOR MYSELF ... BUT FIRST I MUST SATISFY THE DEMANDS OF MY FAMILY ... BUT FIRST I MUST PUT EVERYTHING ELSE IN ORDER ... BUT FIRST I MUST FINISH MY BUSINESS DEALS ... BUT FIRST I MUST SAVE MYSELF BEFORE I START WORRYING ABOUT ANYONE ELSE.

Let's face it ... taking care of family matters or funeral matters -- those are important realities to all of us. Why was Jesus so harsh in his response to would-be followers?? At this point in the gospel - Jesus was no longer on some ho-hum round-up of followers. He had "set his face to go to Jerusalem" -- he was heading for the ultimate mission of God ... TO SAVE THE WORLD FROM CHAOTIC, SINFUL, BIGOTTED SELFISHNESS. When that's the goal of your mission, there's no longer time for secondary things like family reunions or even burial customs. When you're on your way to your own death -- then you aren't thinking about burying others, or family frolicking, or Cedar Point trips, or other fun and relaxation.

Obviously, Jesus is not saying these are bad things. There is a time to bury the dead; there is a time for family reunions; there is a time for reminiscing and remembering. But there's also a time for single-mindedness of mission -- when nothing will get in the way of the kingdom of God. And too often, from Jesus' viewpoint, his followers renig on that singlemindedness of mission that he had.

Believe me, I would love to get up here every Sunday morning and tell jokes and stories, and have a good time, and entertain all of you. And, certainly it's appropriate to offer entertaining humor in our preaching. But if I'm here only for a good time or few laughs - then I've not been faithful to God's Will and Word as a called and ordained servant. He has not called me or Bob or Larry to be "Saturday Night Live Hosts on Sunday Morning" -- he has called us to the serious business of establishing his kingdom in this world. And he gives us only 15-20 minutes a week to do that business; the rest of the time is given over to everything else. So, in these texts Jesus is not asking that we take him literally -- but he is asking that we take him seriously! HE WANTS FAITHFUL FOLLOWERS TO GIVE FOCUS TO HIS KINGDOM ... rather than ALWAYS focusing upon everything else first!

It's like the story of the novice artist who had just completed her first beautiful landscape. Her family lavishly praised her work; but her wise uncle shook his head when he saw the painting. She was crushed by his response; she pleaded with him, "Don't you really like it??" He responded, "Oh, I like it very much ... I even love it, but it will not last! Your picture has too many centers of interest ... a large tree over there, the snow-capped mountains over here, a crumbling fortress over there. In time, people will be confused about the focus of your picture's subject ... and even you will begin to dislike it. No work of art can endure with too many centers of interest."

Likewise, life from God cannot endure with too many centers of interest. Our world will never be delivered from chaos and crime and concupiscence as long as we continue to be "sort-of-Christians" ... always answering God, "But First!" So how can we change ... how can we be converted from zigzagers to straight-shooters to the kingdom? There is only one way: we must become impassioned with the life of Jesus Christ.

Look at the life of Christ. Would you say that he was "sort-of-God" ... sort-of-faithful ... sort of committed ... or was he totally God for us?!? Jesus Christ was totally, completely, fully committed to serving us. When the Bible says, "he set his face for Jerusalem," that's just not a figure of speech -- that's total determination to be the love of God for us. Jesus was not partially faithful to the will of God; he fulfilled the will of God "by loving the world so much that he gave his life for each of us" TO SHOW US THE WAY OF THE KINGDOM.

Jesus Christ did not have a multitude of centers of interest; he had one center of interest - BRINGING THE KINGDOM OF GOD INTO THE WORLD. And what is the kingdom of God -- it is being ruled by God's love for others. Jesus Christ was consumed by this one focus: HE SOUGHT TO SAVE HUMANITY FROM SELF-DESTRUCTION through forgiving love. Nothing interrupted this mission. Satan tried. The powers and principalities of the world tried. Even his own followers sometimes tried to interrupt his mission.

The Good News is that WE ARE ALWAYS FIRST IN GOD'S SIGHT -- nothing interrupts God's love for us. Is it any wonder that Jesus wants us to live with that same singlemindedness of mission?? Instead of answering the call of the kingdom by saying, "But first I must do this or that" ... Jesus calls us to be immersed and impassioned by his faithfulness: "But first I must serve and praise God, my Father."

I'm reminded of the life of Vilfredo Pareto, a mathematician and sociologist of the 1800's. Pareto discovered the 80/20 rule. His conclusion was that 80 percent of the results usually comes from 20 percent of the events. Putting it into a modern framework -- in many businesses ... 80 percent of the sales comes from just 20 percent of the product line. Or translating it to the church -- too often 80% of the mission work and support comes from less than 20% of the people. Or stated negatively, less than 20% of the people seek to put the kingdom of God close to FIRST IN THEIR LIVES.

Jesus challenges Vilfredo Pareto's rule: he calls for a 20/80 rule in the life of the church: that LESS THAN 20% of God's people will put the kingdom last ... and that MORE THAN 80% of the people will "praise and thank God with his passion and his sacrificial will." That's a great challenge. Today can be the first day of your life and mine where we will say, "FIRST AND FOREMOST, I WILL SERVE AND PRAISE GOD ABOVE ALL ELSE!" You're presence in this place is a great beginning!! Thanks be to God that his FIRST CHOICE of you has motivated you today TO MAKE HIM YOUR FIRST CHOICE DURING THIS HOUR!! I pray that you will continue to make his kingdom your PASSIONATE PRIORITY - YOUR FIRST CHOICE EVERY HOUR! And in your last hour, I especially pray that your obituary will clearly reflect not only your faithful commitment to the world ... but especially your faithfulness to God's kingdom in this world.

AMEN.

PENTECOST VI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
June 30 and July 3, 1994
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"KEEPING THE FAITH!"

"For the Lord will not reject forever. Though he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone." Lamentations 3: 32-33

"But overhearing the others, Jesus said to Jairus, "Do not fear, but believe ... And he took the little girl by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha koum!' which means, 'Little girl, Get up!'" Mark 5:37,41

Last week, Pastor Michaels offered a powerful sermon about the "storms of life" and how Christians trust Christ's power to restore our lives after stormy & chaotic moments. I commend him for his compassion & good pastoral theology, but he did make one critical error: he compared Toledo's east side to the Holy Land. But he forgot to tell us what part of the Holy Land resembles the east side. I urge all of you to look up the "Valley of Kidron" in your bible dictionaries ... for certainly Larry was comparing that part of the Holy Land to the east side. (Let it never be said that Pastor Michaels had the last laugh on this one!)

But enough of this local humor. Larry accurately indicated that it is our faith in Christ's power that helps us "put the pieces back together again after the storms of life." But today our text presses this "stormy symbolism" to the edge: WHAT IS THE GREATEST STORM OR GREATEST CLOUD OF DARKNESS THAT YOU COULD EVER IMAGINE HAPPENING TO YOU AND YOUR FAMILY? Many experts would say that one of the greatest clouds of darkness for any family at anytime is the loss of a child.

That is the cloud of darkness overhanging today's gospel text. Jairus, a synagogue leader, is in peril of losing his little girl to death. Nothing tears apart a person's faith or family faster than the loss of a child. One psychiatrist recently noted that most authorities estimate that up to 75% of all couples will separate or divorce after the death of a child.

Jairus was a man in deep pain. He had every reason to give up. While he was seeking Jesus, a crowd gathered to confirm the death of his daughter. Yet he would not despair; HE KEPT THE FAITH in a Word of New Life. In the middle of this storm of chaos and despair, he continued to cling to the compassionate Word of Jesus Christ. Something compelled this synagogue ruler to believe that only Jesus Christ could offer a word of VICTORY under the dismal circumstances of defeat that he was facing. When Jesus said, "Do not fear but believe," somehow Jairus was

able to KEEP THE FAITH in these words of assurance of NEW LIFE. And unlike anything seen by the crowds of that day, Jesus took the little girl's hand and commanded her "to get up from the dead." The point of the miracle story is obvious: only God, and God alone, can turn the defeat of death into the victory of new life. And Jairus is commended, because he believed: HE KEPT THE FAITH ... HE TRUSTED IN GOD'S POWER TO GIVE NEW LIFE!

As we celebrate our American heritage this weekend, we must commend our forebearers for KEEPING THE FAITH just like Jairus: FOR TRUSTING IN GOD'S POWER TO GIVE NEW LIFE OUT OF ADVERSITY. To venture to a new land in those days was like believing that the dead could rise to new life. Our forebearers left everything--they gave up all security ... their land, their friendships, their family ties, even their familiar customs. They came to a strange place to build "a land of the free and home of the brave." Under the magnitude of much suffering and sacrifice -- esp. in seeing many of their children die along the way -- only God, and God alone could have turned the defeats of those deaths into the victory of new life in a new land.

The question today is: what has happened to that courageous faith in a God who turns defeat into victory? Where do we see that faith which is willing to suffer and even die for the greater cause of new life? Do we put that faith in God anymore, or has our faith become little more than trust in technology? Certainly technology can keep life going -- I would not be here this morning if it were not for the wonders of cardiological advancements. But technology has also made us cowards to suffering and death: perpetual intibation is not life! putting loved ones in homes so they can suffer and die at a distance is not the God's "good" life! Unlike our forebears, today there can be no signs of suffering or death or maimed life near us or in our neighborhoods. Let's be honest: technology has not made us a more humane and loving people. In fact, quite the opposite has happened in our great nation: more people are dying on our streets; more people are suffering in poverty; more prisons are needed for more criminals; and more people are dying by suicide and by sexual diseases never even imagined by our forebearers. It certainly would appear that KEEPING THE FAITH in modernism has not turned the human conditions of defeat & darkness into the divine promise of victory & light!

In fact, our recent Synod Assembly revealed a church still in the dark about true faithfulness. A resolution on limiting hand guns and hand gun ammunition was introduced for consideration. Almost immediately, it was referred for study to the Synod Council BECAUSE IT WAS VIEWED AS TOO CONTROVERSIAL FOR DISCUSSION ON THE FLOOR. There was a day the church would have hotly debated that issue on the floor ... hoping that the ultimate decision WOULD HAVE SHOWN THE CHURCH'S FAITH IN A GOD WHO SEEKS TO PROTECT

HIS PEOPLE FROM CRAZY GUNSLINGERS WHO TERRORIZE OUR CITIES TODAY WITH WEAPONS THAT ARE NOT MEANT TO KILL ANIMALS BUT TO KILL GOD'S HIGHEST ORDER OF LIFE. That same spirit of faithlessness was apparent in a resolution from a congregation asking the Synod "to dismiss the ELCA task force on sexuality and throw the study document in the trash can." Obviously, there are many devout Lutherans who do not agree with the Statement on Sexuality as it presently stands; but where is our FAITH IN A GOD whose love "is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude, not insisting on its own way, but seeking above all what is right!" Regretably, I must admit that the recent Synod Assembly seemed to be "acting out of fear and darkness" more than it was committed to the VICTORIOUS LIGHT AND SPIRIT OF CHRIST.

Is it any wonder that Jesus Christ entered the hornets nest of despair over Jairus' daughter ... and every other nest of darkness, whether the NW Ohio Synod or Hope Church, Tol. Time and time again, Jesus entered into the darkness of fear, chaos and death to offer a word of compassion and hope. To the woman caught in adultery about to be stoned, he said: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." To the thief pleading for pardon on the cross, he said: "Today you will be with me in paradise." And to Jairus, the synagogue ruler, he says, "Don't be afraid, but believe. ... And he took his daughter by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum, which means, Little girl, Get up." Jesus' miraculous word is always TO KEEP HIS FAITH IN US EVEN WHEN WE HAVE FAILED TO KEEP OUR FAITH IN HIM ... ALWAYS a word of assurance, a word of acceptance, a word of forgiveness, a word that changes death into new life. This will always be the Word of Jesus Christ; likewise, this will always be the Word of those who KEEP THE FAITH in his church. Christ's friends are those who help people "get up," not the doomsday sayers who are always sending people "down to hell."

There is an old story of a man who was deathly ill in a leading American hospital. His doctors, who were some of the best in the land, simply could not offer him a diagnosis. Several times he was told "that if they could only diagnose his disease they would undoubtedly cure it." After several days of futility, they finally told him that a diagnostic specialist would be visiting the hospital and had been asked for a consultation on his case.

The expert diagnostician arrived. He examined the man and studied his charts very carefully. And then after a thorough analysis, he turned to the attending physician and simply said, "Moribundus," which was a fancy medical way of saying, "he's dying."

But the dying man made a spectacular recovery. He didn't know the meaning of "Moribundus." But with that

word, he finally felt hope -- he believed his disease had been diagnosed. And since he had been told that if they could diagnose it they could cure it -- he figured he was on his way to a victorious cure! One simple word of death had become his word of life.

Obviously, KEEPING A MIRACULOUS FAITH is rarely that easy. But the ministry of Christ's compassion is ALWAYS THAT SIMPLE! The ministry of Jesus Christ is to bring hope/assurance into the circumstances of fear, darkness and chaos in this world. God does not ask us to do the healing; he only asks us to offer his word of compassion in order that hope & healing might take place. Jesus' healing of Jairus' daughter was not to make Christianity a "miracle workers" religion. But it was to make Xanity a religion which offers compassion and hope at every level of suffering and dying--a religion which is not defeated by death, because we live confident and hopeful of NEW LIFE!

This past week I again experienced that FAITHFUL VICTORY in visiting one of our members dying of cancer. Her suffering was so far advanced that she found it difficult to even talk. But after a brief exchange of loving concern, she said: "Peter, just hang in there; don't despair over my situation." I quickly said, "Be assured, I'm not despairing, but I'm wondering what word you might be looking for from me?" She paused for a moment, and then said: "VICTORY!" Even in the midst of death, she still wanted a word of victory. So we prayed for God's victory of everlasting love & life. Even though she could not physically "get up," she wanted to hear God say: "Get up here with me!" I left her in peace, knowing that she had KEPT THE FAITH even thru valley of death!

Henri Nouwen, a contemporary theologian, has called the Christian church a body of "wounded healers" -- those who offer compassion because they have first known suffering. He says: "Compassion is not pity. Pity lets us stay at a distance. (compassion hugs) Compassion is not sympathy. Sympathy is for superiors over inferiors. (not condescend) Compassion is not charity. Charity is for the rich to continue their status over the poor. (assures equality) Compassion is born of God. It means entering into the other person's hurts. It means taking on the burdens of the other. It means standing in the other person's shoes, not taking away the pain, but willingly sharing it!

Jesus was compassionate. He entered into fellowship with hurting people. They knew that he knew how they felt because he had been there. God had not delivered him from the pain of death and torture. He had been mocked, ridiculed, laughed at and crucified. He knew the real meaning of suffering and pain for the sake of others. He knew what it was to be a wounded healer.

This world desperately needs wounded healers like Jesus Christ -- people who have suffered pain and humiliation and thereby know how to offer compassion for the pain and humiliation of others. Wounded healers give more than advice. Wounded healers are aware of the loneliness of suffering because they have been there, but they KEEP THE FAITH by caring even in the midst of pain and hurt. Wounded healers make their own wounds the motivation and the reason for caring for others. Wounded healers remember how their pain was relieved through the care and compassion from others.

Why is it that our American forebearers could KEEP THE FAITH in this God who talked about a new land of freedom and courage? Because they were wounded healers - they had suffered the pain and abuses of religious bondage in an old land. They had heard God say, "Get Up and Give New Life to America!" Why is it that alcoholics make the best counselors to other alcoholics? Because they are wounded healers -- they are the only ones who can say to their fellow alcoholics: "Get up and get a new life without the juice that kills."

We, the body of Christ, are all wounded healers, because we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. We know the pain and suffering that results from sin. We have all been there! But we have also been in the presence of his grace. We have all received God's assurance of forgiveness and NEW LIFE. That's why we keep coming back to this place: because this is the one place we can KEEP THE FAITH ... WE CAN ALWAYS BE CONFIDENT AT THIS TABLE THAT WE WILL HEAR A WORD OF COMPASSION AND MERCY FROM GOD. Yes, this is the one place where God always KEEPS THE FAITH ... he always keeps his promise to forgive us and tells us "to get up and make a new life!"

AMEN.

Pentecost VI (Peter/Paul)
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
June 29, 1997
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“Human Wisdom or Divine Foolishness?”

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. I Corinth. 3:18-19a

Over 20 years ago I had my first major confrontation with the wisdom of this world. Sue and I had been invited to LA for the 1976 Rose Bowl. We were being hosted by a major executive of the K-Mart corporation who had been a member of my Troy congregation until he moved in 1975. After a few drinks before dinner, he finally decided it was time to lower the boom. He began by asking, “Peter, why are you wasting your life & career in the parish ministry.” He followed that by saying “that with my abilities, I could be doing much better in the business world.” He concluded by challenging me “to aspire to a worthwhile future -- get out of the ministry and get into something worth my commitment of time & energy.” Can you imagine what he would say today if he knew I have taken a 35% pay cut to be Chaplain rather than Sr. Pastor at Hope Lutheran!?

Obviously, I was being told that the only worthwhile pursuits of professional life are careers that pay big incomes, have lots of prestige and bring the pleasures of the world with them. My dear friends - that K-Mart executive was no more in the minority in 1976 than he would be today. Esp. these days, it has become difficult to motivate strong, people-centered-people into the parish ministry! And the reasons are exactly the same as my K-Mart “ex-friend” indicated: not enough pay, not enough prestige, & too often a perception of very little pleasure.

Obviously, there is nothing inherently wrong with goals of economic security and prestige in one’s vocation. We all desire those things in life. But as so well articulated by my ex-friend -- today it is not merely a goal, it is too often a life-consuming obsession. So, rather than a goal it becomes a golden calf idolatry -- a worldly wisdom which says that “if you’re not filthy rich, you’re nothing!”

Well, I am certainly not the first or last pastor who has been challenged by that worldly wisdom. Martin Luther experienced the same from his own father. When he accepted the monastic life over his father’s desire for him to become a prosperous lawyer, his dad was so enraged that he nearly disowned Luther. Like me and many others, Luther did not choose the wisdom of the world; he choose the divine foolishness of God -- serving his fellowman as a Monk of all things. And according to the world - that is the height of foolishness ... choosing a life of poverty and sacrifice over a life of material plenty and success.

Is it any wonder that the church is not the bastion of popularity for our youth & young couples. In an era where self-gratification & “having fun” are revered as the ultimate “wisdom of the world,” professions which emphasize “servanthood” and “sacrifice” are hardly going to rate even among the top 100. The divine foolishness of Christ is hardly revered in any age which promotes a philosophy

of "take care of yourself first" -- because Jesus' principles say "turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, love your enemies, take up your cross and follow me, lose your life for my sake" ... or in short, be prepared to sacrifice for my sake!!

Sacrifice. Sacrifice. Sacrifice. That's the real rub ... that's the thing about the Christian faith that just does not fit into the human scheme of wisdom. The world likes the "love" ethic; the world can even live with a little "forgiveness & mercy," as long as it doesn't go overboard. But "sacrifice," no way!! Because sacrifice means that you and I must give up "greed & self-interest." And the wisdom of this world pursues greed & self-interest -- "take care of number one, and don't worry about the next guy!" Human wisdom says, "Live for today, and let tomorrow take care of itself." Human wisdom says, "Get your share now while the gettin' is good!" Human wisdom says, "don't only take what you need, take all you can get ... and then some!"

Is it any wonder that St. Paul said "such human wisdom is total nonsense." In God's sight, human wisdom is folly because it only takes care of today ... it only thinks of the needs of the moment ... it only has a vision for getting through this moment with no vision for tomorrow. That was the short-term thinking of the corporate take-overs in Toledo in the 80's; and who today in Toledo is better off because of that wisdom other than a few fat cats who were at the top??

Human wisdom always is short-term thinking -- it is folly because it only thinks about the needs of the moment. It says that only fools seek a better tomorrow -- only fools seek first and foremost to serve the interests of others. Well, there are scads of stories which contradict that foolish notion ... because all the heroes of this world have been "fools for Christ" -- people who first & foremost sought to serve others. And I particularly remember the story of Wally. Several years ago he was on a bus with my brother & other Army reservists heading for Fort Knox. It was one of those hot, sultry summer days like we had this past week (100 in Washington DC Weds.). Along with several cars, the bus was standing still at a RR crossing awaiting an approaching train. The tracks were parallel to the bus; rising behind was a long, steep hill. As the soldiers relaxed, they heard the engineer giving full throttle to the diesel as it approached this hill.

Like others, Wally sat slumped next to my brother leaning on his golf clubs. Wally was one of those reservists who always seemed to be half-awake or half-asleep. But as the train neared - the silence was shattered by a loud cry: "For Christ's sake (appropriate) - somebody do something!!" As the soldiers stood, they saw a little girl standing on the tracks, oblivious to the approaching train. They stood frozen - unable to act - except Wally.

Wally sprung to his feet and dashed through the Emergency Door. As the locomotive hurtled past the bus, frantically blowing its horn, they could see Wally scrambling up the 15-foot embankment toward the little girl who now stood frozen in freight as 10,000 tons of rolling thunder was bearing down on her. As the forces converged, the soldiers saw Wally leap into the shadow of the speeding locomotive.

The sparks continued to fly from the train's wheels as it slowly ground to a halt. The engineer kept sounding the horn in bursts - telligraphing his panic at what he surely felt had come to pass. Then the train backed up. As the gigantic train passed the 15-foot embankment, the crowd (now gathered on the other side) blurted out a tremendous cheer. There stood Wally on the other side with the little girl in his arms - his sun glasses broken and dangling around his neck. As the train stopped and he put the crying child down, he yelled to the crowd: "Somebody better call an ambulance - I think I broke her shoulder."

When the ambulance left, the reservists got back on the bus. But my brother said there was no longer boisterous noise on the bus ... a strange silence had set in. Each soldier seemed to be wrestling with the question: "Why did I not act?" And they all knew the answer. Human wisdom had told them that it was too much of a risk ... they might actually have to sacrifice their own lives for that little girl!! That would be pure foolishness by the wisdom of the world. And yet each of them also realized ... that if someone else's life wasn't worth saving ... then how could there's be worth saving. And that was a heavy question as they contemplated the possibility of serving in Viet Nam.

Yes, Wally had been a fool. He had acted at great risk to himself. His act of bravery was utter foolishness -- divine foolishness!! He sought to save someone else's life by risking his own. And that's utter foolishness ... the utter foolishness of Jesus Christ ... the utter foolishness that puts human wisdom to shame!!

My dear friends -- I'll celebrate Wally's foolishness any day before I'll celebrate the human wisdom of the rest of those troops who only thought of themselves. All of life was enriched by what Wally did. And like my brother, the reservists will never forget that day going to Fort Knox ... because they finally saw how divine foolishness is really what matters most in this world! They saw the kingdom of God made visible by a guy named Wally. He showed that the values of the kingdom make a lot more sense than playing it safe by the wisdom of the world.

And hopefully - that's why you and I are here celebrating today -- celebrating the life of Jesus Christ who was foolish enough to say: "My body and blood given for you!" That same Jesus Christ called men like Peter and Paul to follow in his footsteps. And these two men, pretty much like Wally (a fisherman & a tentmaker) these two men became "fools for Christ." They were fools by the standards of the world ... because they sought to serve others rather than themselves.

I'll take the foolishness of Peter & Paul any day to the chicken-hearted wisdom of this world. And maybe that's still the best answer that I should have given to my K-Mart executive friend: "I'm in the parish ministry ... and I'm becoming a chaplain because I love the divine foolishness of God who says, 'he who loses his life will find it, but he who saves it only for himself will never know the joy of the kingdom!'" Let's face it - the real heroes of this world are the Wallys ... the St. Peters ... the St. Pauls ... and all the ones who live by the divine foolishness of sacrificing for the good of others & the sake of the kingdom!"

Amen.

*Pentecost VI
First English Lutheran Church, Toledo
July 15, 2001
Peter R. Martyn, Part-Time Interim*

“UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT”

The lawyer answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live. Luke 10:27-28

Today I want to share a story of two service station managers, Clem and Jesse. Some forty+ years ago, I worked for both of them while I was finishing high school and in college. They both owned their stations – Clem owned a Shell station and Jesse owned what is today a Sunoco station. I am deeply grateful to both of them, for without them – I would have had much greater college debt. They were both really nice guys – both good managers ... both hard workers and successful ... **BUT BOTH HAD VERY DIFFERENT MANAGEMENT STYLES.**

Clem, the Shell manager, most often managed from a small, backroom office in the station. He gave the orders, and we did the work. Once in a while -- when we were really confronted with a job that needed expert troubleshooting, he would get involved; but most of the time “he gave orders” from the back office. Sundays were always his day off. He would often come to the station in his sports car on Sundays just to check up on things. Since Sundays were slow, we were always expected to clean up the station & make it spick ‘n span for the next week. I pretty much viewed Clem as a “keep my hands clean manager.”

In terms of scripture, Clem reminded me of being “Under Old Management.” Why? His management style reminded me of the perception that many of us have of God in the OT. Just like God in the OT, Clem was a deeply, loving person – he always had the best of intentions, but he always seemed to run the station from a distance. He gave orders in words, but rarely got involved in the flesh. Obviously, like God in the OT, Clem was very dedicated to running the station, but it just didn’t feel like he was really there with/for us. It often felt like he was managing from an ivory tower – from a distant place ... kind of like a prophet giving orders from a mountaintop. Clem seemed detached ... distant ... disconnected from his workers.

Jesse on the other hand, the Sunoco owner, always managed from the grease pits. He was always right there with us. He lived next to the station and would come over any time we needed help. When we changed spark plugs, Jesse burned his knuckles on the hot manifold pipes just like us. When we replaced mufflers, Jesse tore his knuckles just like us on those stubborn U-clamps. When times were slow, we took in car washes ... and Jesse was right there with his wash mit with us. There was no work that was ONLY work for the hired hands

at Jesse's station. In my senior year of high school – I had to choose between playing football and working at Jesse's station. I chose Jesse's station; it was more than a book of football plays ... it was a daily lesson on how to work as a team and at the same time care for the needs of other people.

Work at the Sunoco station was scripturally like living “Under New Management” – it reminded me of the way many of us perceive God in the New Testament. The commandments are certainly the same in the New as in the Old. It's still the very same God ... and it's the same “love with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.” But Luke is different from Deuteronomy because now it's just not a matter of words ... now it is a God who is living those words. Now we have a God who is loving with heart, soul, mind and body as Jesus Christ. Now God is not merely “asking or commanding” my all in all from a distance. Now God is giving HIS ALL IN ALL right there with me.

Well, I doubt that I need to tell you which management style motivated me the most. I willingly worked for Clem because he was the boss. But I would have laid my life down for Jesse because he had already laid his life down for me and many others. Jesse and Jesus had a lot in common. Because when Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength” – he's not just talking like Clem ... he's living it like Jesse. He's in the grease pit with his fellow workers ... getting his hands dirty ... burning his knuckles ... rolling up his sleeves ... giving to others as he expected others to give! Jesus does not ask us to find the gift of eternal life on our own – he actually gives us the gift of eternal life through his own example. He shows us what it means to love God & others in heart, soul, mind and strength.

What a joy to be living “Under the New Management” of Jesus Christ. What a thrill to know that you and I are here not because somebody/somewhere is “yelling out commands from a back, heavenly office.” We're here because Jesus has been here and his Spirit is now en-fleshed in all of us thru Baptism. Jesus is not some remote boss ... he's not a Lord who gives orders from a distance. Jesus IS a Shepherd who walks in the wilderness with each of us ... Jesus IS a Savior whose footsteps can be followed in this world. HERE is a Lord who has already been tempted and mal-treated ... HERE is a Lord who has already been challenged & condemned by the bosses of this world ... HERE IS a Lord who has suffered and sacrificed his WHOLE LIFE in order to show us the meaning of eternal life: the sacrificial love of God -- not just cheap talk.

“Under New Management” we don't merely take orders – we imitate the lifestyle of our leader. Under Christ's management, we are not being asked to do something for which we have not seen the daily example from our own boss and leader. Let's face it – we all resent bosses who BARK BIG ... but LABOR LITTLE! Several years ago, Robert Townsend wrote a book called “Up The Organization.” He stated that the greatest challenge facing business was to remove the barriers to the boss – to make workers feel that the boss was with them ... sensitive to their needs and their concerns.

When God inspired the New Testament – he removed all the barriers to himself. He gave us himself in the flesh ... a leader, a boss who lived his daily life in this world being compassionate & concerned about real human needs. He gave humanity a leader who would inspire and motivate by a living example of what he expected from every follower. Isn't it interesting that God fashioned this "New Management" style some 2000 years ago ... and it's still proving to be the best model for all productive enterprises yet today.

So that raises an important question for the enterprise known as First English Lutheran Church: which or whose management style has this congregation most faithfully followed over its many years? There can be no doubt about the fact that a century+ of mission at First English has been lived in the example of Jesus Christ and his sacrificial love. But there have been times, I fear, that First English has slipped into the old "management style" – a style where God was detached from the real world ... where God was only up in the heavens giving distant orders. When God's presence becomes so distant & detached, then often his followers function the same way – they become detached from the mission that God has given them to fulfill in the world ... they become internalized and are tempted to overlook some of the needs of suffering around them. Like the priest and the Levite in the parable – they see religion as an internal thing and walk by those crying for mercy in the neighborhood. God's mission becomes verticalized and internalized.

Is it any wonder that Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan? This was the example of his New Management Style for his church. In this parable, Jesus brings God's presence into the highways and byways and ditches of our everyday world. No longer is God far off – giving orders from some distant office. Now God is right next door – crying for mercy from the roadway or the alley of any community. Now God is not merely seen in the face of a distant deity but in the face of a tormented neighbor or a street person. Under Jesus' new management of ministry, God says: *"Out of love I have made the ultimate sacrifice for you; now what kind of loving sacrifice will you make for your neighbor to glorify me and what I have given to you?"*

The question is: How will we show that we already possess eternal life? Will we show that the love of God has been captured in our hearts, in our souls, in our minds & in our strength? Or, will we show that God's love is just a momentary thought that we have on Sunday mornings? The life of Christ, our Leader, again answers the question. Jesus totally manifested God's example of love from the heart, soul, mind and body to anyone in need of mercy. That's the new management style that you and I have graciously received. In Baptism, in Communion, in any hour of need – Jesus comes to heal us as wounded neighbors. He does this with one hope – that we will see this as his gift of eternal life ... and be daily motivated to give that gift to others. So it is that he says: *"Go and do likewise!"*

Amen.