

Wednesday Lent IV  
Redeemer Lutheran - Milwaukee  
3-15-72

## "FILLING THE GAP"

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. (Eph. 1:7-8)

How do you and I bridge the gap between what we are and what we ought to be? Between what we do and what we ought to do? This is our supremem ethical question throughout life. It is an equally supreme religious question.

God is holy and desires holiness; we are unholy. God is love and desires love; we are unloving. God is perfection and desires perfection; we are imperfect.

For all of us who possess even a crumb of Christian conscience, this gap between WHAT IS and WHAT OUGHT TO BE plagues us for the length of our days. It creates uneasiness -- anxiety -- and even destructive guilts. It splits us in two. It often drives us to a life of pretense -- pretending to be what we really know we're not. It may even make us distort the truth, because we just can't admit that we have limitations -- that we fail -- that we don't live up to what we or someone else has trumped us up to be.

And so we are even driven more deeply in trying to justify ourselves. IN trying to make ourselves look better -- in trying to make up for yesterday's failure -- in trying to fulfill all the requests and demands that we couldn't quite complete yesterday. Yes, this is the game of self-justification -- trying to justify ourselves in the eyes of God and one another. How easy it is to get caught up in this game - a game which can never be won through our own efforts.

For the more intense our efforts -- the more we seek to fulfill the laws of perfection -- the more aware we become of the impossible width of the chasm. There is no way that you and I ALONE can fill the gap between WHAT WE ARE and WHAT WE OUGHT TO BE. The Apostle Paul after much self-fulfilling effort finally cried; I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

~~Some~~, Someone must fill that gap for us. Someone must enable us to accept ourselves as WE ARE, even with our failures and faults and broken promises and unfulfilled requests and prejudices and indifferences and gripes -- someone must accept us with all these marks of iniquity, before we can become new persons -- before we can be freed to become WHAT WE OUGHT TO BE -- before we can experience new life. And that someone has come to fill that gap -- he <sup>has</sup> filled it with his own life -- and he does so again today. *and everyday that we seek his fulfilling presence.*

For in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us.

Yes, we have come here again today knowing that WHAT WE ARE and WHAT WE OUGHT TO BE are separated by a valley and infinite gulf. But we have also come to thank God for building an eternal bridge between that valley through his Son Jesus Christ. For as we have confessed our failures, our faults, our broken promises, our indifferences, our jealousies and gripes to Him, we have seen him take them and without rebuke, cast them away in order that we might begin anew from this moment.

And in that one sacrificial action from Christ, WHAT WE ARE becomes WHAT WE OUGHT TO BE -- a new person, without a blemished past, without a need to justify ourselves for yesterday's failures -- a person who has dumped his guilt and any other garbage that may destroy his own integrity or that of someone else. There is no longer a need to prove oneself in order to be better in God's sight or anyone else's -- Christ has already proved that we are acceptable through His loving action.

We are here to accept that grace -- that forgiveness. Through Christ WHAT WE OUGHT TO BE -- forgiving, loving, compassionate servants of God -- is WHAT WE ARE. And that is worth celebrating NOT ONLY in this half hour of worship, but in every moment of life that God grants us.

Imagine just for a moment that this is a court room. I come to this lectern, the convicted one -- the one who has slandered the judge, who has overlooked his laws of love, who has hurt, been envious of, yes, stabbed others with my knife of selfishness. I confess my guilt -- I await the sentence. I stand here, totally undone. Then the incredible happens. The judge steps down from the bench. He takes my penalty upon himself -- he goes to death for me.

I stand in the sight of the court -- I am freed, as if I had never sinned. I am freely acquitted. I haven't even tried to prove myself. I even admitted my guilt. Yet I am a free man.

The judge -- he who was totally innocent and righteous -- has made me innocent and righteous by sacrificing his position, his honor his only life for me.

Any sentence, even a reduced and merciful one, could not have moved me. But this! What can I say?! What can I do?! I am free. Free from judgment and condemnation. And all because a judge who had every right to sentence me to death had such love for me that he went to death himself.

I am now free to become **WHAT I OUGHT TO BE** through Christ -- a servant who has known perfect love and forgiveness. A servant who can now live anew by sharing that same love and forgiveness. That is my mission as a free man in Christ.

Your are my witnesses. And I am yours. We need not be ashamed at **WHAT WE ARE**. For through Christ we are **NO** longer **WHAT WE WERE--** we are now **WHAT WE OUGHT TO BE** -- grateful servants of our Lord; ~~servants~~ who have been loved even when we should be condemned to death; servants who have been forgiven even when we deserved to be punished. Servants who no longer need justify themselves out of guilt and fear. But rather servants who have been justified, and who now respond to this gift of grace by offering the same kind of love, forgiveness, and compassion to each other and to a world of people who are hungry for that same kind of ~~loving~~ loving gift.

Let us not let that glorious gift die in this hallowed sanctuary -- but let us ~~give~~ *lavish* it ~~upon~~ *upon* the highways and byways of our lives.

For in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he has lavished upon us.

LAETARE. THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT  
Redeemer Lutheran Church  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

"FINDERS ARE SEEKERS"

sermon by Rev. Peter R. Martyn

"Ho, every one who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and he who has no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price.  
Why do you spend your money for that  
which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not  
satisfy? . . .  
Seek the Lord while he may be found,  
call upon him while he is near;  
let the wicked forsake his way,  
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;  
let him return to the Lord, that he may  
have mercy on him,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly  
pardon." (Isaiah 55:1-2, 6-7)

When thirsty, we seek water. When hungry,  
we seek food. When lonely, we seek companions.  
When tired, we seek rest. When broke, we seek  
work or financial assistance. When bored, we  
seek entertainment. When perplexed, we seek  
direction. When sick, we seek medical help.

By nature, you and I are seekers -- we're  
people who look for ways to satisfy our needs.  
And equally by nature, when we find a source  
of satisfaction for our needs, we'll seek it  
out again. In simple terms we might say that  
FINDERS ARE SEEKERS. Let me illustrate.

Have you ever gone to a really good movie --  
one that really spoke to your needs at that  
moment?!? How did you feel after it? If  
you're like me, you probably said: "Now that's

one show I'd like to see again. And you very likely told all your friends about it billing the movie as the greatest of the year. Yes, when we find something good, we really seek to digest it.

There are others who get this same satisfaction from reading books. Or watching an afternoon T.V. melodrama. Some get this satisfaction from a particular worship liturgy, or hymn, or even preacher. Many of us get this satisfaction from eating -- especially as we find a favorite dish. We seek it time and time again.

But if we are really honest with ourselves, even three square meals a day do not completely satisfy our hunger. Good movies, T.V., books, alive worship, boats, ski-mobiles, summer cottages, -- and all the other purchased pleasures that we have found and continue to seek -- DO NOT fill our deepest need.

For just like the boy at the bubbler on our bulletin cover -- we drink up the physical stuff of life, and our thirst is temporarily quenched. But we will thirst of these things again and again. And we will seek and find those things which will quench that thirst. And within reason, that is both good and natural. But there will still be a gnawing emptiness within us.

Isaiah puts it this way: Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? In other words if WE give OUR whole being for the physical stuff of life, we miss the ultimate meaning and purpose for life. For meaning and purpose comes through relationships, NOT OBJECTS.

So, what can you and I FIND and continue to SEEK that will give us lifelong satisfaction -- that will quench our thirst eternally?? I believe and you believe, my Christian friends, that there

is one answer for us to this question. And that is: SOMEONE who will always ACCEPT us, and make us feel ACCEPTABLE! And of course the someone is God in Jesus the Christ.

It is only because Isaiah FIRMLY BELIEVED that God had accepted his people, and that he would always make them feel acceptable, that this prophet could proclaim with utter confidence:

Seek the Lord while he may be found;  
call upon him while he is near;  
let the wicked forsake his way,  
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;  
let him return to the Lord, that he may  
have mercy upon him,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

He WILL abundantly pardon -- NOT he can, or he might, -- BUT he WILL! You and I CAN turn to that kind of <sup>God</sup> person and feel ACCEPTED and ACCEPTABLE. And I believe that TO FEEL ACCEPTED AND ACCEPTABLE is what you and I believe to be the greatest find -- yes, the greatest TREASURE of life.

To feel accepted and acceptable IS TO BE THOROUGHLY SATISFIED. And so we have come here again this day. To seek the Lord. To call upon him. To forsake our wickedness and unrighteous thoughts. To return to the Lord for his mercy. To be abundantly pardoned.

Yes, to be accepted and made acceptable -- so that we can be models of the Lord for someone else who might be seeking the Lord -- someone else who might be seeking TO FIND an answer to the gnawing emptiness of his life.

How do you feel about this gift of acceptance? Is it worth telling your friends about? Is it worth sharing COMPLETELY with your family? Do you know of anyone who DOESN'T feel accepted? Who doesn't feel acceptable? Can you share

with that person what you have received??  
I believe you can. But you may be feeling a bit inadequate about the task. But God has made it clear that he can use you regardless of how inadequate you feel.

We are so often preoccupied with great evangelists or the images of impressive pastors. Similarly, we too often look for God in impressive places and imposing people. Not that HE CAN'T be found in these and others like them, but God so often works his way through the most common, sometimes even unlikely people and places.

There was Moses - who we often think of as great. Yet he was a murderer on the run tending sheep for his father-in-law, reduced to living on his wife's family.

There was Amos, rough and tough, desert-born and -bred, mincing no words with the genteel churchwomen of Samaria--calling them, "you cows of Bashan!" Pretty strong words for one of the church's biblical prophets!

There was the lad in today's gospel who had five barley loaves and two fish. The disciples almost poking fun at this lad as Simon Peter says: but what are they among so many?! But this little lad's offering was more than acceptable when given to the Lord's service. Imagine how fully accepted this little guy must have felt after that feeding!

There was Mary Magdalene -- a person who had known rejection and exploitation as a prostitute--- NOW an accepted and acceptable servant of the Lord.

There was Jesus -- of Nazareth in Galilee, of all places. Of a carpenter, of all heritages. And yet, the Son of God and Lord of Lords.

There is YOU, and there is ME. The majority of us NOT TOO GREAT by the world's standards. But we have received the greatest gift of all--- we have been accepted without paying a cent



for it. We have been made acceptable WITHOUT having to buy off anyone for it. And as we have found this most precious gift from the Lord, we want TO SHARE it because we KNOW how much everyone needs it! And God has said that we are acceptable to share it - regardless of our knowledge or degrees or training. In fact, titles often get in the way.

I need only recall this past week to be reminded of this. Because of special circumstances, I had to take one of the office gals with me on a call. Without her, that call would have undoubtedly been a disaster. But she was able to make the person called upon feel accepted and acceptable! And her training for this was the same as yours and mine -- the gift of acceptance from her Lord.

The other night I was called and asked to visit the son of one of our inactive members. After giving my assurance on the phone I hung up and said to Susan: "That really amazes me!" And then I bit my tongue. For I remembered that this person was seeking the Lord through me. And regardless of her church attendance, she needed to feel accepted and acceptable! And so did her son. And they were seeking the Lord -- and hoping for his abundant pardon for the past, *and his mercy in the present.*

God has offered us a fantastic treasure -- his acceptance of us each and every time we return to him. We have been FINDERS of a great gift, and we will continue to be SEEKERS of it. Because we know we need it, and can't live without it.

It is given without money and without price -- and we can give it to each other in the same way. Let us fill one another -- for God has enabled us to quench each other's thirst without price or money.

And he continues to use the MOST COMMON,

sometimes EVEN UNLIKELM, persons and things to assure us of his acceptance. Yes, God uses a simple little wafer and less than one ounce of wine. And with these basic elements of life, he says: Come, and be filled -- BE FILLED completely with my acceptance of you!!

I will abundantly pardon you! You have been made acceptable -- do this in remembrance of me.

Come! Seek the Lord! Call upon him. Return to him and be abundantly pardoned. And then rejoice -- laetare, laetare, meaning rejoice-- in being filled with the Lord.

Amen.

LENT IV  
Luth. Church of the Master - Troy  
March 9, 1975

"FOLLOW THE LEADER"

"But Jesus called (the disciples) to him and said: 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'" Matt  
20:25-28

A little over a week ago, about 400 influential leaders met at the Detroit Athletic Club. The dignitaries included top executives from the Auto companies, great athletes, and such headliners as Joe Gariagiola. It could safely be said that a significant number of society's top leaders were gathered in one place.

When Henry Ford II, just returned from his California drunken driving escapade, entered the pool flanked dining room, all the guests arose and gave him a standing ovation. I'm sure some of this was in jest -- but I'm also sure that much of the applause was saying: "Henry, we like your style of leadership -- we'll follow your way anyday." I'm sure that many of these leaders were identifying with Mr. Ford's casual attitude toward drunkenness and illicit affairs.

John Ricardo, Chrysler's top executive, was also a headliner that day. He was being initiated into the Beavers -- The D.A.C.'s honored group of swimmers. As he was introduced and took front-and-center in his pool robe, the entire assembly put on masks of Mr. Ricardo.

And so there he stood -- in the spotlight -- looking at 400 mirrored images of his own face. Can you imagine the feeling of power that must give a man? What kind of false sense of pride does this create within a human leader?

Obviously - like any other type of fun-loving fraternity, there is always a note of humor in this type of thing. But beyond the humor, there is also a real element of HUMAN IDOLATRY here. This type of thing is often a secular ritual -- where a fallible human being is elevated to a near unreachable cloud of glory! To the extent that any human allows himself to be SO INFLATED, to that extent MAN HAS CREATED AN IDOLATROUS FORM OF LEADERSHIP.

All positions of leadership are vulnerable to this trap. It is exactly the trap that the mother of the sons of Zebedee was asking for.

She wanted instant glory for her sons. Honor without ANY MORE effort. She wanted her sons to have authority over others -- to lord it over everybody else.

If ever there was an age where this <sup>style</sup> ~~concept~~ of leadership wants to reign supreme, we are living in it. Not only do mothers want this instant glory for their sons/daughters -- but our whole society is geared to the COMMAND FOR IMMEDIATE GLORY.

For instance, what does a young person do when he/she feels he can't quite make the achievement level that his parents have set for him? We all know how he/she feels! GUILTY! WORTHLESS! UNIMPORTANT! Our suburbs are loaded with guilt-ridden kids -- kids who live in fear that they will not fulfill their parents' dreams for them. Is it any wonder that drugs and booze become a way of escape for handling anxiety and fear?

Obviously, kids need to feel the importance of discipline and responsibility -- but God has not taught us responsibility by ~~putting us~~ <sup>personal</sup> ~~glorification~~. He has taught us responsibility by GIVING US AN EXAMPLE of love and servanthood - ~~namely,~~ <sup>responsible</sup> Jesus.

~~Contrary to what some may think,~~ <sup>We all know</sup> Jesus' example was not lacking in discipline. This is another

*vacuum*

leadership ~~style~~ of our day -- glory without any discipline or effort. How often ~~do~~ ads read: Six easy lessons to become an expert! Or the camping book entitled: "Roughing It Smoothly." This is so often the motto of leadership today - "Get to the top without any effort."

It is especially evident in our age of education-<sup>al</sup> degrees. On the one hand, far too many graduates think that a degree makes them expert. So they get their degrees and then say: Command that I be on the top, Lord.

Like the sons of Zebedee, too many disciples of education today see their degree as the gate to glory, rather than the key opening the door to serving their fellowman. Let's face it - my Master of Divinity degree hardly makes me an expert pastor -- it simply opens the door to being A SERVANT. *Degree = license to servanthood.*

So often - supervisory personnel -- sometimes without even realizing it -- reinforce the glorification syndrome in their novice workers. They often expect "expert" production out of a beginner simply because he/she has a degree.

Too often, for instance, supervising teachers expect expert performance out of teachers in training. ~~A supervisor is charged with the responsibility of helping, not belittling a learner.~~

Yes, we all know the dangers of perverted ambition and glory. Watergate was this country's most recent national example of human idolatry. For those involved - Leadership was defined as personal power and status, not as servanthood. There was only a desire to be on the top -- and to stay on the top. And if someone got hurt along the way, that was tough.

Not so with our leader!! Jesus says: You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them (you can substitute whatever power figure applies to your life for the word "Gentiles.")

Jesus continues: It shall not be so among you. Whoever would be great among you, must be your servant -- for the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Do we see the radical difference in Christian leadership from secular leadership?

Under secular leadership - you must beat down the competitor! You must offer the facade that you are on top -- that you are the greatest among the great. That's what the mother of the sons of Zebedee wanted -- she wanted her sons to be great in the eyes of the world!

And so Jesus says: Do you know what greatness really is? Can Your sons drink my cup -- the cup of servanthood and sacrifice? Christian leadership, says Jesus, is serving, not seducing -- it is suffering, not status seeking. It is giving for the sake of others, not simply taking in order to bolster up your own ego.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem -- to his "THRONE" of leadership. And that "throne" was not an executive office in the sky, with plush carpeting and dashing beauties manacuring his toenails.

Jesus' throne was a ~~wood~~ cross on a lonely hill. Leadership for Jesus was synonymous with giving -- with suffering. Leadership was sacrifice, not status. Before there could be new life - resurrection, there had to be the cross.

How does this style of leadership translate into our own lives. How do you and I lead? Whose lead do we follow? Is our following to get glory - or to give help? Are we willing to encounter the cross before we expect to experience the resurrection?

For instance, how does this translate into our financial commitments? Is our giving disciplined by any sacrifice -- or is it simply

a token gesture. Are we disciplined enough to make a REAL COMMITMENT -- or do we take the easy way and only give what's left over?

Whose leadership model are we following -- that which gets us ~~something~~ - or that which gives someone else a share of our love in Christ. In short, are we willing to suffer JUST A LITTLE in order to serve?

*Today we go to Oakland Co. Hosp.*

For instance, I've been told that nobody likes to go to Oakland Co. Hospital because they can't stand to see suffering people. My friends, I don't relish the atmosphere either.

But in Christ, we have been given the strength and the desire to serve the suffering and the healthy. To follow his leadership is to serve all conditions of humanity.

Unfortunately, that means there will be times when we will feel queezy -- I'm sure Jesus himself felt pretty queezy when in leper communities. But that's where his gifts were often needed - and that's where his gifts from us are needed. *wherever suffering is misery shows itself.*

In Christ, we are willing to experience some discomfort - some suffering - yes, to experience just a part of the cross. Because we have been called to be serving leaders -- for it is through sacrificial helping that we will ultimately experience new life -- resurrected life.

Christian love is more than wearing OUR LEADER'S mask. It is receiving HIS help, and then giving it -- in tangible forms of service. We do this - because we follow a SERVANT leader - and there is NO BETTER leader to follow.

*leadership style AMEN*

LENT IV  
Luth Church of the Master, Troy  
3-28-76

"THE GREAT GAMBLE"

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."  
John 3:16-17

Each of us has a primary role to fulfill in life. It may be parent, teacher, professional leader, or skilled laborer -- but to live fully is to strive toward fulfilling at least one primary role.

In fulfilling that role, we are in constant relationship with others. Such being the case, we are constantly observing their behavior. And in that position, we must often BY VIRTUE OF OUR ROLES strive to motivate changes in the behavior of others.

To do this - most of us choose one of two options. We motivate by fear and condemnation; or we motivate by disciplined love.

In motivating by fear, we find ourselves saying "either do this, or else." "Improve your sales or production, or you'll be fired." "Shape up, or you'll be shipped out."

Motivating by disciplined compassion finds us saying: "Because I have demonstrated my love and acceptance of you - you will FOR YOUR OWN GOOD follow these guidelines." This motivation does not suggest the tone of condemnation or damnation.

Like individuals, societies have sought to motivate by choosing the same options -- but of course history has borne out that the majority of civilizations have chosen motivation by fear. From Caesar's military state to modern communism and capital punishment, society



continues to choose FEAR and CONDEMNATION to actualize behavioral change.

But long before individuals or societies were confronted with these two options, God himself had to decide between these disciplinary styles. Should he use FEAR - or should his style be DISCIPLINED LOVE?

All three lessons today clearly underscore his choice of divine discipline.

God was confronted by a sinful and disobedient Israel. He had delivered his people from bondage and their gratitude was simply rebellious grumblings and complaints.

God could have continued the threat of death by snakebite to motivate change. In fact, it did move the people to see a relationship between their sin and the plague of snakes. God could have offered them a bargain -- those who cleaned up their lives and generally behaved themselves would be preserved from death by snakebite.

In such a case, change of behavior would have been motivated by fear. But the people would NOT have truly been changed. Fear and the desire to escape punishment can do wonders to change outward behavior, but it cannot change the inner motivation of the heart.

Fear does not bring about the kind of salvation that God desires -- for it only changes man's outward nature. Inwardly - he is still bent upon himself -- still greedy and selfish --

So God makes no bargain with his people. He offers them the bronze serpent - and anyone who looks at it will live. The bronze serpent was a concrete symbol of God's disciplinary style -- a style of forgiving love and concern for his people.

Likewise, "God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved." God's primary concern is not punishment or destruction; he wants sinful people

saved. And to change people FROM THEIR UNCLEAN WAYS, God feels there is only one way -- to LOVE THEM FIRST. That leads to NEW fellowship, rather than continued alienation.

It means that HIS PEOPLE become so motivated by ~~their~~ love for God who first loved ~~them~~ THAT ~~they~~ DO HIS WILL FREELY AND GLADLY.

There is no doubt about God's method of divine discipline -- IT'S A GREAT GAMBLE. We need only look at the world -- at ourselves -- to realize that his disciplinary style has not created a perfect order -- THERE IS STILL GREAT NEED FOR BEHAVIORAL CHANGE.

But God does not ~~change~~ <sup>shift</sup> his disciplinary style JUST BECAUSE it has not been 100% successful. Grace through faith may not always succeed, but it is the ONLY successful way to change the inner HEARTS of men.

And God is not only concerned about changing man's outward behavior -- he wants our commitment from within -- he wants our allegiance OUT OF LOVE, not out of fear.

The choice is still ours. We can choose the way of salvation OR the route of fear in seeking to change the behavior of others.

I know, and so do you know, how tempting it is to choose the discipline of fear. I had almost decided to use that style this morning in regard to the care cadre.

I have been very disappointed in the response to this attempt to involve the whole congregation in a caring ministry for one another. How easy it would be for me TO USE fear to get people involved -- I could have said -- "either you get involved in the care cadre, or you can forget about pastoral care from me when you need it."

That's discipline BY FEAR. Using that method might cause a few people to outwardly change --

they might join the cadre on Weds. evenings.  
But their motivation would be BY ETERNAL FEAR,  
rather than inward love.

There is no healing OR caring in that style.  
It would probably alienate more than it  
would discipline by love.

There still is only one way TO MOVE PEOPLE  
TO A LIFE OF GOOD WORKS. And that's to tell  
them that God so loved the world that he gave  
his only Son that whoever believes in him will  
not perish but have eternal life. And not only  
tell them these words -- but show them in  
personal relationships THAT THEY ARE LOVED  
even if they aren't perfect -- even if they  
stay away from the care cadre -- even if they  
only come to church at Christmas and Easter --  
even if they have failed miserably as God's  
children.

There's no doubt -- it's a GREAT GAMBLE to  
offer that disciplined love -- for it might  
not succeed the way we'd like it to -- BUT IT'S  
THE WAY OF SALVATION.

And that's the gospel that we believe in.

AMEN

LENT IV  
Luth Church of the Master, Troy  
March 5, 1978

"WHO'S THE GREATEST?"

"If one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant of the rest -- like the Son of Man, who did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life to redeem many people."

Matt. 20:28

One thing must be said for Mrs. Zebedee -- she was a good Jewish mother. She was looking out for her sons, James and John. If the kingdom was being ushered in -- then she was going to be sure that Johnny and Jimmy got their positions of honor.

And how many of us don't find ourselves identifying with Mrs. Zebedee and her boys? Let's face it -- most of us would be right up there with Zebedees looking for our positions of honor. There can be no doubt in our minds about the Zebedee brothers -- they were hard working disciples. If anyone deserved to be Number I -- they sure did!

And for all their dedication, Mrs. Zebedee was right up there with the boys to make sure that they got their proper reward. After all, they had given up a very lucrative fishing career with their father -- the least Jesus could do would be to give them FIRST CLASS seats in the kingdom.

I sure hope we all can see the humor in this scene and laugh a little bit at the circumstances -- because these are not only the aspirations of James and John, and their Jewish mother. There's not a person in this room who has not clamored for a little status or prestige on the basis of his good works. My mother may not have been Jewish -- but let no one kid you -- she was always looking out for her two sons. And I hope your mothers were or are the same -- I hope they care enough to look out for your good. We all want our kids to have

the best of opportunities -- especially when they work hard and show their determination.

But like Mrs. Zebedee, even with our best intentions WE are often teaching our children a very bad lesson -- either directly or implicitly -- we are directing them to be status seekers or self-serving sponges. Like Mrs. Zebedee -- we too often define greatness in terms of reward -- and not in terms of responsibility. Along with the Zebedees - too often our main motivation is TO GET rather than TO GIVE.

Yes - what is our motivation for our relationship with Christ? What motivated us to join the church? What motivates us to worship? Why have we become disciples of Christ?

Was it because of what we could give? Or was it because of what we could get? Most of the time when I talk to people about the church, their concern is for what they can get from the it. They want a Christian education for their kids. They want a comforting sermon. They want a group of Christian friends for fellowship, ETC ETC. So often we follow Christ IN ORDER TO GET. But how often do we find people joining Christ's body in ORDER TO GIVE SOMETHING??

Forgive me for painting this as a black or white situation. It should be obvious that we rarely do anything for pure motives -- purely to get, or purely to give. But too often our overall perspective is like Mrs. Zebedee's -- we want special REWARDS for being good Christians. But God is not in the business of giving special worldly rewards -- he only promises forgiveness of sins and eternal life (which really aren't so bad afteraall).

But like many well meaning religious people -- Mrs. Zebedee got her wires crossed. She had confused GREATNESS IN THE WORLD with GREATNESS IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD. Her mistake is one made by many Christians -- including most church bodies.

Every day of our lives we are bombarded by the what our society calls the GREATEST. Whether Muhammid Ali, or Farrah Fawcett, or General Motors -- we all know they are among the greatest in this world. But how did they become the greatest?? Primarily - by looking after themselves. All of the GREATEST have worked hard to be #1 -- but to be the greatest in the world, the motto on the bottom line is SERVE YOURSELF FIRST.

Jesus had some radically different advice for his followers. He said, "If you want to be great, you must be the servant of the rest... like the Son of Man, who did not come to be served, but to serve."

above  
or  
below

Quite contrary to Mrs. Zebedee's concern -- GREATNESS according to Jesus is not a matter of position -- whether one is at the right or left of the boss. But greatness is being a servant of others -- greatness is being at the foot of the cross rather than at the head of the table. Greatness is readiness to help -- being at the bottom of the cross looking for ways to help those who are suffering. To the question, "WHO'S THE GREATEST?" = Jesus Christ answers, he who gives.

---- *Almost sounds like a pious platitude.*

Friends in Christ, that has been the great thrill of shepherding the Master's flock over these three plus years. Every day - every week you look and examples of servanthood flash back at you.

One week it's serving Sr citizens at Calvary Senter; the next it's painting the sanctuzzy. One weekend it's counselor servants at a Youth Retreat -- the next it's paper pick-up servants turning old newspapers into dollars for our Youth Staffer. .... And then there's the every week servants who keep serving, often with little reward: the choir and cleaners.

*committee*  
*functions*  
-- the teaching and the preaching -- the sharing of prayer and deliberations -- and the laborious headaches of paying bills and keeping the ship afloat.

The Master is probably one of the smallest bodies of Christ in Troy -- yet per capita we may have more servants than some of the largest bodies of Christ. What a thrill to serve a congregation that wants to be GREAT by Christ's standards -- by serving others.

But dare we become TOO proud due to our parochial good works -- we'd best remember that God has all kinds of challenges just around the corner. Much as Christ says to the Zebedee brothers - he says to us: To be great you must drink my cup of sacrificial servanthood. With the exception of a handful of disciples at the Master -- most of us have tuned into this directive from Christ.

But in the next 60 days -- and the 18 months or so that follow that -- God will be giving us some real challenges IN SERVANTHOOD. We've all heard the logo by now called STRENGTH FOR MISSION. It's just one of God's strategies to GET US TO SERVE OTHERS.

By worldly standards -- I am certain that the Master will not be among the greatest in our giving to this 25 million dollar campaign for extending Christ's mission in the world. But I believe we will give it a real SERVANTS STAB.

Unlike Mrs. Zebedee - Church of the Master is not seeking any special status or privilege in the kingdom. But I pray that she better darn well be seeking to serve, rather than to be served.

AMEN

LENT IV  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 13, 1983  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"THE HOMECOMING"

"But while the (prodigal) was yet a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ... And the father said to the elder son, "Son you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found. Luke 15:20,31-32

Have you ever doubted the depth of God's compassion and love for you??

Have you ever wondered whether God really cares about individual lives and difficulties encountered in the real world?

Have you ever recklessly wasted a period of your life ... some of your greatest talents ... or a significant portion of your family's resources?? Did you feel an overwhelming sense of guilt -- so guilty that you couldn't face God or your family or yourself?

Have you ever foolishly rejected the love of family or friends ... or the good advice of family or friends?? Have you gone out on a limb after rejecting family and friends only to face failure - emptiness - and the depth of despair??

As a son or daughter -- or as a parent -- have you ever had a son or daughter recklessly waste resources that you have treasured for a lifetime??

Have you ever worked hard in the church ... or lived a life of purity and good deeds only to find the church or God blessing someone else who surely did not deserve all the special attention and support?

Have you ever felt that your actions were so sinful and rotten that there was just no way that God or anyone else could ever forgive and accept you again???

I would guess that each of us can answer "Yes" to at least one of these questions. And if that's the case, then this morning's parable was meant for you and me -- because no matter how many times we've heard it -- it still hasn't sunk in!

It has traditionally been called the Parable of the Prodigal Son - but it is more appropriately titled the Parable of the Patient and Loving Father. Because the main character is not



the prodigal son ... nor the elder son, but the Patient Father. It was Jesus' intent that his disciples focus upon the actions and qualities of the Father -- not the boys. It is the Amazing Grace of the Father that we celebrate in this parable-- not the wasteful and self-righteous biligerence of his boys.

Like no other Biblical teaching or story - this parable really comes home to all of us -- because it's been our story... or it's been our family story... or it's been our neighbor's story. At one time or another, we've encountered this story. So it's important that we reconstruct the significant actions and relationships of this parable to see their special relevance to our lives.

First, we look at the younger son, the socalled prodigal. Many expositors and preachers have treated him as a rebel and runaway. But the parable does not support these accusations. He did not runaway. He very deliberately planned his departure. He told his father he wanted out -- he wanted to make it on his own ... he wanted to build his own little kingdom ... he wanted to be ambitiously independent.

Up to this point - we cannot find serious fault with this younger son other than the somewhat disrespectful request for an early inheritance. But there is no fault in his desire for independence ... there is no immorality or sinfulness in his ambition to succeed away from home.

But the tragic flaw of the younger son is that he wastes his father's inheritance ... "he squanders it in loose living." That is the very meaning of the word "prodigal" -- a waster, one who violates a trust, one who wastes his time, his talents, and in this case, his father's resources.

This is the first point where the parable urges our serious application. Like the younger son - to what degree have we taken the blessings and inheritance from God and previous generations and wasted ~~them?~~ To what degree has our society encouraged "loose living" as the lifestyle to be emulated? To what degree have we spent our fortunes only for self-pleasure and self-flagulation??

To what degree have we sought escape from family or marital tensions BECAUSE WE WANTED TO BE FREE ... but in reality

freedom has really meant loose living and tasting forbidden fruit. Like the prodigal son, the loose living, the freedom seems pretty good for awhile -- but we all know how a wasteful life ultimately catches up with us. Then what do we do?? Admit that we were wrong ... and hope for the best!?

It would seem that this might be the logical step. But not so for the prodigal son! He was alienated from friends and family ... he had run out of funds, he had run out of friends, and he had run out of food. But did he repent -- did he show remorse! Not really! Many espositors claim that his turning back home is a sign of repentance. But we note from the text that what he really did was devise a new plan -- he would go home and become a hired servant.

There is no hint here that he was planning to change himself -- there was no repentant attitude here -- he was merely going to change the circumstances of his life. He is still maintaining his life profile -- he continues to be a clever and determined man -- he's still going to do it his way.

So here we see a second tragic flaw -- one that is his and oftentimes ours as well. His wastefulness led to poverty and despair -- literally to the pits. But he was too proud to admit his defeat. As illustrated in this morning's children's message -- we can often be hurting bad and ruining things around us -- but our arrogance to often prevents our repentance. We are too weak to admit failure or defeat. We will seek to "save face" only through our own merits.

And so we have the prodigal coming home expecting the hostility of his community and his father. And that would be the scene as he approached his village. A crowd would have gathered to jeer him for his blatant humiliation of his father; the townspeople would have been there with clubs and stones.

But the father takes the initiative. As his son is about to be taunted and humiliated - the father runs out from the mob and embraces his son. The villagers are stunned by this demonstration of forgiveness. They drop clubs and stones and stand amazed in the face of this unmerited love.

But they are less stunned than the son himself. He doesn't even get a chance to tell his father his plan. He is over-

whelmed by his father's love. He has only one choice -- he surrenders to it -- he embraces it and lets the tears flow.

And this is the profound point of the parable: What actually works the change in this young man IS NOT HIS EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY -- NOT HIS EXPERIENCE OF ALIENATION -- NOT HIS EXPERIENCE OF STARVATION. These things do not change this man's attitude toward life. But the unmerited love and forgiveness of the father converts this young man into a new person. It was not the young man's efforts or plans BUT THE FATHER'S GRACE that restored a relationship of love.

That's the real HOMECOMING that we celebrate today. We celebrate the love of a Father who overlooks the foolishness of our yesterdays. We celebrate the grace of a God who forgives the reckless squandering that we have perpetrated with his blessings and resources. We celebrate a HOMECOMING where we gather around the Father's table to be renewed and restored so that we might not live so RECKLESSLY and WASTEFULLY in the future. We receive his Amazing Grace in order that we might share it more faithfully today and tomorrow.

Every Homecoming celebration in this arena is a reminder to us that we are not saved by our good works (like the elder brother) not are we damned by our sinful deeds (like the younger brother) -- but our ultimate joy is determined by our acceptance of our Father's love... and our willingness to share it.

The saddest note of this parable is not the reckless behavior of the prodigal, but the self-righteous rejection of both father and brother by the elder son. Here is the one who represents the worst trait of those who claim a religious lifestyle. Not only does he reject his brother -- but he attacks his father. This son is not moved by love or renewed relationships. He has no time for sinners or outcasts -- he is always too busy keeping track of his own good works. He spends his life begrudgingly doing his duty ... telling everybody how great he is... how great his works are ... how great his ideas are!! He doesn't have time to celebrate the greatness of his Father or brother -- because he looks at life only through his own egocentric perspective!

We talk a lot about forgiveness in the church. We love to hear and play great and graceful movements by Bach and Beethoven which are to reflect the grace of our heavenly Father.

We spend hours upon hours in committees and on questionnaires seeking to communicate the truth of God's grace through sacrament and mission. But all of this is nothing more than a prodigal effort -- nothing more than passing or wasted gas -- if the world fails to experience it from us and through us.

God help us not to waste -- not to intellectualize our faith, but to rather actualize it. We too often make our churches places where we come to hear someone else talk about God, the Father. Faith is not only to be talked about -- it is to be contagiously lived.

As God's people, we are to be like him -- the first to forgive, and the last to judge and gossip. That is the spirit of Homecoming around here. It's not only a once a year event, it's an everyday reality and responsibility.

God will always be a Patient and Loving Father. There is no wasteful sin or arrogant pride that he will not forgive. That is the Good News of our Homecoming celebration in this place ... and that is the victorious love that we are called to share at all times and in all places!

AMEN

IV SUNDAY IN LENT

Luth Church of the Master, Troy

March 25, 1979

"WHO CAN YOU REALLY COUNT ON?"

"By his grace you are saved." Eph 2:5

Our whole reason for being here today - or any other Sunday is summed up in the six words just read: By his grace you are saved! Every thing else we do here -- our liturgizing, our praying, our learning, our giving of ourselves, our good deeds -- ALL THESE THINGS and whatever else we do IS A RESPONSE to the six words just spoken. Everything else we do in life is an answer to: By his grace you are saved!

Obviously - some people respond to those six words ALMOST IN THE LIKENESS OF GOD. And still others don't respond at all ... in other words, they live a lifetime without showing any recognition that they have been graced by God --- that they have been gifted by the Lord of history.

Yes, by his grace you and I are saved ... you and I are made acceptable and worthwhile. And there's only one place in the world where you will find this statement: the Bible itself. Every other manual - every other religious book - every other management prospectus WILL TELL YOU AND ME that we are saved by ourselves ... saved by our own sweat. Only in the Bible do we hear this Word of God: BY GRACE YOU ARE SAVED!

Karl Barth, the great 20th century German theologian comments on this passage by saying that someone once said to him: "I don't have to go to church. I don't have to read the Bible. I already know what the church teaches and want the Bible says. They say - Do what is right and do good onto others."

Karl Barth's response to that was: If this is the message at stake in Christianity - then my time and yours is too precious to be wasting here listening to it. If the message is: Do unto others and do what is right, then neither prophets nor apostles, neither Bible, Jesus Christ, nor God are needed. For anybody can say that message to himself. You don't need God to say the message: "Do what is right, and do good unto others."

That message may be an important one in the world ... and it is even part of God's message for the world. But it's not the message that gives you and me hope and comfort as we sit here this morning. Because that message is totally dependent upon me ... and you. And I know that there are many times that I let you and others down. And there are times that you let me and others down.

Yes ... when we become truly honest with ourselves, then we know there are many times that we are unsure whether we can COUNT ON EACH OTHER. This is so well illustrated by that famous college letter that was sent to parents by a daughter in college. The letter went like this:

Dear Mom & Dad,  
I'm sorry to be so long in writing again, but all my paper was destroyed the night the dormitory was burned down by the demonstrators. I'm out of the hospital now, and my eyesight should return soon.

A wonderful boy, Bill, who rescued me from the fire kindly offered to share his apartment with me until the dorm is re-opened. He comes from a fine family, so you won't be surprised that we are going to get married. And since you love little children so much, you will be happy to learn that next month you will become proud grandparents.

Now mom and dad, please disregard the above practice in English composition. There was no fire, I haven't been hospitalized, I don't have a boyfriend, and I'm not pregnant. However, I did get two D's and one F on my grade report ... and I wanted to be certain you received this news in proper perspective.

Love,  
Your daughter, Joy

The illustrative impact of this story is that the daughter DID NOT KNOW if she should count on the love of her parents. She did not know whether she would BE ACCEPTABLE in their sight after telling them of her poor grades. Her great fear was REJECTION by her own parents BECAUSE OF THE FACT THAT SHE KNEW SHE HAD NOT DONE RIGHT ... she knew she had blown it... and now she feared even greater rejection than she was already experiencing.

And this is the <sup>real</sup> arena of life. Most of us live in constant fear of someone or something because inside ourselves WE KNOW WE ARE NOT PERFECT. Every honest human being knows that he's a sinner ... a prisoner to his own flaws and the flaws of the world around us. For many of us - we are held captive by greed; for others caged by anxieties - others by distrust - still others captive to unbelief.

And no matter how long or how hard we work at it -- not one of us ever frees himself totally from this imprisonment. I have known and seen some of the greatest geniuses of the world WHO SUFFER FROM THE GREATEST SENSE OF PARANOIA that anyone could possess. Because they know no matter how hard or how long they work at perfecting life by themselves -- they will never finish the task ALONE. *not in control of human destiny*

And it's into that predicament that the Word

the ultimate Word - is spoken from on high:  
By grace you have been saved! [ It means to be  
pulled out like a log from a burning fire. To  
know the word of grace from God is to know  
that my sin, my captivity, my suffering are  
yesterday's reality, not today's!! ] *today's  
crisis*

By his grace you are saved ... you are freed  
from yesterday's incompleteness... yesterday's  
guilts ... yesterday's faults. *\* Possibly this*  
basic power of grace can best be illustrated *Prophet*  
through the story of a pastors' therapy group.  
In this particular group -- a combination of  
preaching and group dynamics was used to help  
these persons to grow.

Each person preached and then allowed the  
group to analyze that person's preaching and  
personality in the group session.

One man in the group kept talking about his  
"gre-ea-eat ministry." And yet all the rest  
of the pastors really were hearing another  
message from this man.

He had layer upon layer upon layer of  
frustration that he was hiding. His life was  
really full of hostility, bitterness, and  
disappointment. He had tried to get a certain  
degree at a specialized school -- and after  
spending enormous amounts of money, he had  
discovered the school was worthless. Likewise,  
his other dreams had not materialized. He was  
feeling like an utter failure inside. And yet--  
here was a man who wanted to appear AS HAVING  
A MEANINGFUL JOB, A SIGNIFICANT MINISTRY. This  
was his greatest desire in life. *to look good!*

And yet the man had been burned out by all  
the setbacks. And he could not break loose  
from these imprisoning setbacks. He could not  
experience the fullness of God's grace -- of  
God's love for him.

And so it came his turn to preach. He stood



before us and shouted his message. He let us know in thunderous tones what the good Lord had to say to us. He shouted us all down! He swirled to the right... and waved his arms ferociously at us. He gyrated to the left shaking his fist at us. Throughout the sermon... his voice erupted in a booming, blaring, blasting emotional tirade.

And then it came time for him to come and watch himself on the videotape. And he didn't show up. And a second time was arranged. And he didn't show up.

You see, deep down inside himself, he knew what all the shouting was about. It didn't have anything to do with the gospel. It had to do with the mask he was wearing to cover up all his hostility -- to hide all the disappointment of his life. He shouted about the gospel so that we would not know how bitter he was about the way life had dealt him a blow. He was using God's Word to hide his own despair.

Finally - the technician arranged for a private viewing of his sermon. The preacher came. And he watched himself -- and for the first time in a long while... he really saw himself.

And as he came out from that private viewing to the group dynamics session -- he began to ball and sob like a baby. Uncontrollably he cried! Again and again, he broke down. He had to get rid of all the self-hatred that he had allowed to build up inside himself.

Yes - he finally let God enter into his life AND FORGIVE HIM ... free him from the past mistakes ... unchain him from all his disappointments. For the first time in a long time, this man BY GOD'S GRACE HAD BEEN SAVED. For the first time in a long time, this man came to realize that his destiny WAS IN GOD'S HANDS...

AND GOD COULD REALLY BE COUNTED ON TO LOVE HIM!

This man left a new man -- no longer needing to hide behind his masks of importance. He no longer had to pretend to be someone he was not ... he was free to be a child of God.

At last, by God's grace he was saved! Really, when I stop to think about it -- the story of this life is Pete Martyn's story. And I'm pretty certain the story of most of us here.

How often we try to justify ourselves in one another's sight by pretending to be so good ... when we know that there is only ONE GOD WE CAN REALLY COUNT ON. And by his grace we are saved!

AMEN

LENT IV

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 29, 1981

"THE PAUSE THAT REFRESHES"

"As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside ... (and after speaking for the third time of his suffering, death, and resurrection, he said) You know that the rulers of the Gentiles Lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so for you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant.

MATTHEW 20:17,25-26

In his commentary on this text, Dr. John Rilling, former Ohio Synod president, says: "the words 'Jesus took the twelve aside' should be underscored, encircled, italicized, even underscored with a red marker." He claims that phrases like "he took them aside" or "and he went off alone with them" were often special cue words by Matthew and the other evangelists. They were cue words that something quite significant was going to be said or done by Jesus soon thereafter.

And how accurate Dr. Rilling and other scholars are about this. For whenever Jesus pauses to be alone with his disciples -- a significant revelation follows -- whether it be a teaching like the Beatitudes, or an event like the Last Supper, or a post-resurrection appearance behind locked doors. Significant things ... extraordinary revelations often occurred when Jesus took the time TO PAUSE ASIDE WITH HIS DEVOUT FOLLOWERS.

There is a simple truth for life in this action by Jesus. Jesus got away from the busy, mainstream of life in order to share the meaningful & the magnificent, the significant and saving realities of life. Isn't this truth the same for our lives???

The sign in the library or sanctuary reads "Please Keep Silence" because significant reading or listening cannot occur amidst the pollution of noise and distractions. Likewise, confidential communication occurs behind closed doors -- where pastor, lawyer, physician and client/patient are protected from the mindless chatter of the world outside.

Alcoholics Anonymous has always emphasized → "anonymous," because there is a moment in any diseased person's life when he/she wants a sanctuary -- a safe place from caustic and crude criticism. A.A. Meetings represent a time for being alone with the Lord and others who need his healing. A time to PAUSE to be REFRESHED -- not by liquor, but by the caring and compassionate support of others.

Yes - we all need THE PAUSE THAT REFRESHES. We need "to take time" to go aside to share the significant, the meaningful, the magnificent of life. We all need this because much of our lives becomes overburdened with the mundane and mediocre -- with the petty and the pernicious. We all need moments which cause us to pause -- to search for the significant ... or to renew, reform, revitalize that which is ongoing.

This past week Sue and I attended our first Refresher Class for Lamaze Childbirth. That pause to be refreshed only reinforced my developing thoughts for today's message. We had taken ourselves aside to consider the magnitude and significance of childbirth. We had paused to be refreshed by a teacher who had great concern for us ... a teacher who was helping us to better care for each other. Those pauses make for life's real meaningfulness.

If you've been around Hope Church on Wednesday nights in the last month -- you've experienced that same PAUSE THAT REFRESHES. Over the centuries, that's been the real purpose of Lent. A time to be pulled aside from the busyness of our mundane activity and consider the significance of Jesus' life for us ... and our life for one another.

Through potluck, and film, and dialog, I have already experienced significant growth and renewal from the 35-40 people in my mini-course. I know the same has been true for the leaders and participants in the other two courses. Refreshment, renewal, revitalization only come when we pause and take time to be enriched and strengthened by one another.

But we cannot limit ourselves to Lent. Are you aware of the fact that more than 125 of Hope's confirmed members have committed themselves to serve on congregational committees or Church Council. That means one out of every 6.5 confirmed members is serving in this way. Add to this our teachers and

and choir members -- and the number exceeds 160. That means one in every five confirmed members REGULARLY takes time to pause and reflect upon the mission of Christ through this church. It takes time to coordinate and implement the mission of Jesus Christ -- but thank God for the 160 who regularly step aside to analyze the mission of Hope. Because as they do so -- not only are they refreshed, but they make it possible for all of us to be renewed, revitalized, yes ... refreshed.

And its this focus which leads us to the main point of our Lord in today's text -- he took his disciples aside and in so doing identified the real meaning of GREATNESS from God's point of view. Like any good Jewish mother, Mrs. Zebedee wanted her boys to be the greatest. And like most of us -- she had defined greatness in terms of position and status.... being on the right side and left side of Christ.

But Jesus characterizes the deeper matter than the mundane meaning of greatness. Greatness he says, is not in our self-admiration, but in our self-service. Greatness is in our pausing -- in our taking time to serve and care for one another, even after being let down by others.

Jesus *not only* offers this as some kind of esoteric, philosophical or intellectual principle. He lives by this maxim of greatness.

He had every reason to give up on his disciples and the whole human race. Time and time and time again he had been let down. And as he was let down -- God was let down. Time and again - God's people sought self-privilege rather than self-responsibility. Had any one of us been in God's shoes, we would have undoubtedly said: "let them go to hell."

But not so with God through Jesus Christ. Greatness is continuing to serve others even after disobedience & disrespect. Greatness is taking time to care for the unloveable -- greatness is pausing to forgive the unforgiveable -- greatness is stopping along the busy mainstream of life to heal, to help, or maybe just to hold someone's hand.

That's the greatness of the love of Jesus Christ for you and for me. And there is no greater greatness - no greater meaning -- no greater significance in life than to live

as a disciple of him whose story <sup>is</sup> the greatest ever told. Today - and every day -- he calls us to accept the greatness of his love and presence ... and then to live as reflections of his greatness in the world.

We do that when we take time -- when we pause to serve those who are in need around us. That greatness might be expressed as it was this weekend -- by a couple of dozen amateur painters in Larson Hall. We might be tempted to say -- oh, painting a room isn't so great. But the fact that those 24 people made that commitment has saved this congregation \$1000 -- that means we now have \$1000 which can be used to serve human needs of hunger or hopelessness of some other kind. *Thanks be to God for the greatness of that painting!*

Hundreds of similar examples of greatness can be experienced inside and outside this church every week. Whether its nursery care on Sunday morning or delivering mobil meals Monday thru Friday; Whether it's an office volunteer or a corporate vice president who still takes time to love his family and share fellowship with friends -- all of these and many more are examples of greatness by Christ's standards.

But rather than besiege you with a multitude of examples -- let me just share one today that every one of us could up-hold: namely, to become a Shepherd of Hope. A few weeks ago - the Evangelism Committee *urged that I* incorporate the shepherding program in a sermon.

A Shepherd of Hope is either a family or individual who commits himself to oversee ONE NEW FAMILY BEING RECEIVED INTO OUR MEMBERSHIP. The commitment lasts for a minimum of six months. During that time, the shepherd (or shepherd family) seeks to help the new family or individual feel more "at home" at Hope.

The specifics duties of the shepherd are posted on the Evangelism display near Larson Hall. Essentially - the shepherd's role is simple, but significant -- to be a caring servant for others, especially new members.

With more than 90 adult members received in the last 18 months and another half-dozen families prepared for reception **Palm Sunday, April 12th** -- the need for an active cadre of shepherds is vitally essential.

Our Lord has established this body as a servant organism. We are called to be a shepherding flock. We are commissioned to step aside with Christ -- to take time to pause and refresh one another with genuine concern and support.

That's the principle of greatness in the Church of Jesus Christ. We are a shepherding people -- a people who like their Lord, take time to forgive ... to love ... to heal ... to help and to hold one another.

That's the basis of our greatness as the body of Christ -- not in our status, not in our size, not in our geographical location -- but in our commitment to take time to serve and shepherd one another in the name of Jesus Christ.

Before you leave today - take THE PAUSE THAT REFRESHES: show someone else (especially a stranger) that you care because you're a shepherd - a servant of Christ.

AMEN

# SHEPHERD OF HOPE

## QUALIFICATIONS:

- 1) Active member
- 2) Caring person - concerned for others
- 3) Involved in programs and worship
- 4) Positive attitude and personality
- 5) Willingness to assume responsibility (incl. training)
- 6) Willingness to report quarterly to Evangelism Committee

## DUTIES:

- 1) Pray for all members of Hope daily
- 2) Accept assignment to "shepherd" new family or individual
- 3) Be available to greet new member at brunch
- 4) Arrange for a get-together with new member (family) the week before reception (at least by phone)
- 5) Be present on "Reception Sunday" to greet and introduce new member (family).
- 6) Explain "Time/Talent" Commitment Form to individual (family).
- 7) Give new person(s) tour of the facility
- 8) Encourage new family (individual) into at least one "educational or fellowship" area of Hope's life.
- 9) Be sensitive to new family's worship/communion pattern
- 10) Encourage new family (individual) to attend special functions through a personal contact of encouragement
- 11) Touch base with the Evangelism Committee at 3 month and 6 month intervals to report "how things are going."
- 12) Help draw new persons into circles of friendship and encourage new member to become a shepherd.

(Detach and put in offering plate or send to church office)

---

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

I will serve as a Shepherd of Hope beginning \_\_\_\_\_, 19

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



LENT IV  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 17, 1985  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## GOD REACHED OUT AND TOUCHED EVERYONE

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." John 3:16-17

There are times in our lives when we need to get the truth put together in a simple, straight-forward package. Too much of life is complex and complicated. We all yearn for those moments when the complex and complicated becomes the common and comprehensible. Today is such a moment in terms of our texts.

All sixty-six books of the Bible, all the teachings of the church fathers and great theologians, and all the profound doctrines/canons of ecclesiastical hierarchies are summed up in what Luther called "the little Bible:" John 3:16. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life."

As one biblical scholar has said, "When you say John 3:16, you've said it all!" That one verse summarizes the totality of our faith. Just look at it -- it answers the four basic questions of theological inquiry:

- 1) WHAT IS THE NATURE OF GOD? "God so loved." The essence/nature of God is to love his creatures ... to love his creation.
- 2) WHAT IS THE OBJECT OF GOD'S LOVE? God so loved "the world." Not the church, not perfect people, not the saints, BUT THE WORLD.
- 3) WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF GOD'S LOVE? God so loved that "WE MAY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE." God desires an everlasting relationship with each and everyone of us.
- 4) WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF GOD'S LOVE? God so loved that "whoever believes" might not perish. God plays no favorites -- there is no exclusiveness in God's kingdom -- everyone is invited. It's universal - it's a global love affair -- given to all who will accept it.

Can there be any question about the nature, object, purpose and scope of God's love after a text like this? And the other texts for the day emphasize the same theme.

The Numbers text tells us that Moses put a bronze serpent on a pole -- and just looking at it meant "life." Can the gospel of forgiveness be made any more graphic in the Old Testament? The Ephesians text says: "By grace you have been saved. God has raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms." Can there be any question about the nature, object, purpose and scope of God's love? How much more graphic does God have to make his Good News? Do we still question "whether we are saved?" Do we still have doubts? If someone asked you today, "Are you saved?" ... will they find you hemming and hawing and hesitating and being afraid to say: "Yes, by the grace of God!"

We want it said simply, so God says it simply and graphically in John 3:16. But even with it so simple, so profound, so graphic -- many still don't get it. That was so classically illustrated for me this past week by a bumper sticker on a pick-up. A very attractive blond was driving this shiny-Chevy pick-up with two yellow bumper stickers with chartreuse letters saying: "REACH UP FOR JESUS." Now I'm certain this young gal was a devout and dedicated Christian. And it was heart-warming to see a beautiful young woman taking a religious stand. But I found myself repulsed by the message: "Reach up for Jesus." That whole message seemed backward, upside down, inverted to me. Instead of Good News, it was bad news!

As Christians we profess that Jesus descended to the earth -- that he was sent by the Father -- that he came into the world to us, not that we go to him. That's the direction of motion -- from God to us, not us to God. Through the Son, God has taken the initiative to move toward us -- TO REACH OUT AND TOUCH EVERYONE OF US. We sing ... HE'S GOT THE WHOLE WORLD IN HIS HANDS.

Some of you may be saying -- "seems like Martyn is making a mountain out of a molehill." But the implications of "reaching up for Jesus" are several ... and they totally deny the essence of John 3:16. "To reach up for Jesus" implies that God is very distant -- and that WE must bring him near. Or again, such words may suggest that Jesus is very indifferent -- and that we must make the first move in order to persuade God to care. Moreover, to "reach up for Jesus" implies that it is our effort, our determination -- that we must first prove our righteousness before God will come to us. "To reach up for Jesus" leaves us grasping for an unreachable Lord, an indifferent and distant God.

That's not the message at all of John 3:16 ... "God so loved the world that he gave ...." God takes the initiative -- he's the one doing the "reaching out." It

is God WHO IS REACHING OUT AND TOUCHING US WITH THE GRACE OF THE CROSS -- THE GIFT OF SALVATION! God is not above us, but among us and in us and through us -- reaching out and touching us with his forgiving love.

That's the first, simple but profound message of today's text: THE LOVE OF GOD IS NOT A MERE PRODUCT OF OUR MINDS, BUT A PROCESS OF OUR HEARTS AND LIVES. Too often we have just made the gospel - the Good News - a mere intellectual idea or concept. Just another mental product to store away or reflect upon in the recesses of our minds. But the gospel is more than a product for mental processing, it is a process for productive application. God initiates; God takes action; God descends into the world; God moves; God suffers on a cross; God heals; God raises the dead; God resurrects life; God ascends; God comes to inhabit his world. These are not mental notions -- these are God's actions of salvation GIVEN FOR ALL OF US.

God doesn't detach himself to the heavens, he reaches out to the world and touches it with his body and blood. He gives himself totally to the world -- not just a piece of his life, but his whole life. The gospel is more than a product of the mind -- it is God touching us in mind, body, soul and strength! That's the Good News!

But that's only half of the process. God reached out to us, in order that we might reach out to others. The gospel is not "reaching up to Jesus," but rather "reaching out and touching others with the love of Christ." And that often means literally "physically reaching out to touch others."

Dr. Larry Webb from LEAD ASSOCIATES spoke to the Ottawa Hills Mothers' Support Group this past week. He pointed out that one of our most basic human needs is "to be loved." Along with success and communication, he said nothing is more basic. He indicated that we show "our love" through our visual contact, our auditory expressions, and especially THROUGH OUR KINESTHETIC TOUCHING. But nothing rates more highly than this third element -- the willingness to touch. Webb indicated that most often we fail as parents in this area -- we just don't touch enough. He indicated that no human expression conveys love more graphically than touch.

He illustrated this point by referring to Dr. Victor Frankl's work in the Nazi prison camps. Frankl noted that the prisoners had become listless, despairing and apathetic. And so he urged that prisoners begin to hold one another and rock with one another. The reality

of human touch began to give the prisoners new determination, a new will to live, a new reason to hope even amidst the certainty of death.

Likewise, a Bowling Green State University professor has done significant research on Adolescent Drug Use. He has found that "drug use decreases dramatically among families who touch and hold alot."

Another researcher at the University of Colorado has been working with two groups of rabbits. Both groups were fed the same high-fatty foods. However, the one control group was continuously held, cuddled and stroked. Among this group, cholestorel levels were found to be 50% lower than the group that was not held. The same diet, but the group cheated of touch had 50% more cholesterol.

As a pastor I could tell you hundreds of stories dramatizing how a final touch or hug has meant so much before the loss of a friend or spouse. There is no greater expression of God's love among human beings than our willingness to hold and hug and touch. In all the sessions of our Lay Ministry Training, possibly the greatest power we facilitated was the importance of "sharing touch" as the reality of God's love.

Today, we commemorate Patrick of Ireland, an Irish missionary. A man of action with little inclination for learning, he was captured at age 16 and sold into slavery. Only after six years as a shepherd did he escape. During that time he was converted to Christianity. And it was the Irish that Patrick proufoundly touched with the love of Christ.

His message was not intellectual -- it was simple but profound -- like the text from St John. St. Patrick realized that God had taken the initiative. God had made the first move: he had given us the example of his love in Jesus Christ. So like God, St. Patrick gave more than a mere product of his mind -- he offered the totality of his heart and life. Like St. Patrick, we know when our hearts have been touched by God ... then we too are willing to reach out and touch others with that same love. And generally -- that "reaching out" means a lot more than a telephone call.

So like St. Patrick -- let's be about the gospel. "God has so loved you and me that he has given his only begotten Son." God has physically touched our world thru the BODY AND BLOOD of his Son. Let us offer our gratitude by touching others with that same forgiving love. That's offering God's love in a simple, straight-forward package. And which one of us couldn't use an extra hug or two a day??

AMEN

LENT IV  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 9, 1986  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"HOME, SWEET HOME !"

(And) the father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'

Luke 15:22-24

"Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,  
Be it ever so humble there's no place like home!  
A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there,  
Which, seek through the world, is ne'er met with  
elsewhere.

Home, home! Sweet, sweet home!  
There's no place like home!  
There's no place like home!

These words may not perfectly reflect your home or mine, but there's a fantasy within all of us for that perfect place called "Home, Sweet Home." Written in 1823 by John Howard Payne, an American actor who had never owned a home, these words reflect our yearning for that idyllic place called "home" -- a place where we experience total acceptance ... a place where we feel appreciated and loved just the way we are ... a place where we can be ourselves and kick off our shoes and not have to prove to anyone that we are better than we are.

We not only yearn for such a "home," the facts are we all need that kind of environment. There is no more basic need than acceptance and love. There certainly is "no place like home!" Anyone of us who has ever traveled in a foreign land knows that great feeling of "touching our own soil" -- of getting back home. Even when we go away for a weekend, we know the comfort that comes to the kids when we have "arrived back home." Even when going out for a night among colleagues or associates -- there's nothing quite like "getting back home" where we no longer have to prove ourselves or "put on any airs."

And for any of us who have ever been lost -- whether by momentary confusion, or by poor directions, or maybe even by our own foolishness or stupidity, we all know the joy of finally "coming to our senses" -- of getting back home again. There's really no place like home!!

Well, obviously, the text before us today is not a reflection of "life in our residential places." Although life in our "residential places" should reflect a sense of

total acceptance and warmth and love and forgiveness, we all know that's not the way it always is. "Being at home" (or Home Sweet Home) in this parable means being close and intimate with God. It means being in his place, under his care and guidance ... and really celebrating his presence. And on this earth in this time and place, "being at home with God" is another way of saying "being with his people, the church." The church is God's home ... God's place on earth. And more than any other place on earth, it should be a place of total acceptance, a place where love and forgiveness radiates, a place where God's will permeates life, a place where everyone under the sun "feels totally at home."

But interestingly, the response of people in the church is often like the two sons in the parable. Traditionally, we talk more about those like the younger son. We tend to call them the "prodigals" -- the ones who have left the fold and squandered their lives away. But in truth, both sons in the parable were lost to the Father. One was lost physically to the Father; the other was lost spiritually to the Father. Both needed an experience of restoration and renewal. Both needed someone who would "bring them back home."

Let's take a brief look at these two sons to gain a better understanding of ourselves and our God. The first son requests his share of his father's estate and soon after leaves "to do his own thing." Many of us can identify with this son. Many of us have had moments where "we've taken ours and then flown the coupe." "Get what you can get with gusto and get out" is often the mentality. Take all of life's blessings -- and then run! We use the family name, we exploit the family contacts, we take and take from the family treasury, we receive mercy upon mercy in love and forgiveness, we are indulged and over-indulged ... and then we announce that we don't need anyone -- "we'll make it on our own, thank you!" And away we go -- from God, from family, from everyone and everything that once meant security, acceptance, and happiness.

And often times this rejection of one-time security leads to the insecurity of the pig pen (which is Jewish circles was the greatest symbol of unfreedom). Possibly no one here today has had an experience exactly like the younger son. But I do know today that many young sons and daughters are "running away from home." By that I mean they are turning their backs on God. They've taken the blessings and abundance of 20-25 years -- and now they figure they can do it all alone. They don't need God; they don't need mom or dad; they don't need marriage; they don't need any of the security blankets offered by this world.

Well, this parable has a special message for all such deserters. It says, "one day all you 'young ones' will come to your senses too." As an old law of life goes, "when we do as we please, we are seldom pleased with what we do." These young will soon learn they are not pleased with their lives. Many of them have already learned this. There is a great new influx of the young back into God's home these days. And their return is being greatly celebrated. But many are still out there "testing it all by themselves."

The really good news of this parable is that they will not be rejected by their Father when they return. In fact, he will forgive them even before the first word of repentance is spoken. That's the good news of Jesus Christ for the rebellious young ... and for their worried parents. God is more generous with those who desert him than we are. His aim is not to punish, but to welcome them back home with a celebration of love.

As God's people, the church, we are the welcoming party for the Father. We are the ones called and chosen to offer God's forgiving grace to any who have strayed. We are the ones whom God has chosen to make this place a "Home, Sweet Home." No greater opportunity or responsibility is given to God's people. What a great joy and privilege to be the welcoming party for God.

And yet, too often rather than being like the Father we tend to be like the elder brother. We all identify the younger son as the "prodigal" - as the one who extravagantly wasted his father's inheritance. But the elder son was also a prodigal - an extravagant waster. He had not moved away physically from his Father, but he had moved to the other side of the globe spiritually.

Here was the one who remained with the Father -- who labored and worked and toiled and sweat. But this son's heart was filled with jealousy and contempt. He was the classic church score-keeper -- always adding every little deed done in order to get special recognition from Dad. His whole life was a matter of calculating for himself -- always trying to come out on top ... always trying to earn special accolades. He did not stay "at home" because he loved the place or his father -- he stayed merely to secure advantage for himself.

As church folk, we must ask ourselves: What motivates our being here "at home with the Father?" Why are we members of the household of Faith? Are we like the elder brother -- merely keeping score for God by expecting greater rewards for our dedication and commitment? We preachers are really prone to this elder brother mentality. We too often parade our piety for personal credit rather

than the benefit and goodness of the kingdom. Which one of us hasn't complained about our hard work and low salaries, totally forgetting that team-work with the Father never promised earthly rewards.

The same is so true of many of the "elders" of the church. We've all heard that charter member complain: "Why are they paying so much attention to those newcomers - after all, I'm the one who broke my back and pocketbook to build this beautiful house of God." How tempting it is to overlook God's mission of acceptance when we have made the daily duty of chores and commitment a pain and burden.

But the Father even understands our tendency toward this spirit of self-righteousness. He answered the eldest son: "My son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and to glad, because this your brother was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Where else in the world do we find a more accepting Father than in the Church of Jesus Christ? Could there be a more perfect Home Sweet Home in this world? Certainly the Father's attitude toward the elder son urges us to examine our attitude toward the world's outcasts -- the poor, the vagrants, the unwashed, the unwanted, those who have done stupid things, like running away from home.

Just yesterday, I was again confronted by my own heresy in this matter. One of our members called about a young man who was without shelter for the night. The facts were known to both of us: we knew this young man had created the situation for himself. He has been stupidly "on the run" for a long-time. But was this time his turn-around? Was this his time for coming to his senses? Was he genuinely trying "to come back home?" I certainly wasn't giving him any benefit of the doubt. Yet the unanswered question still looms: Will he find a Father or anyone at home who will run to him with open arms and help him feel accepted and loved??

As hard and as risky as it may be - the mission and ministry of the church is TO BE A HOME for those seeking acceptance and love. We are the HOME SWEET HOME for sinners, tax collectors, and all the other outcasts of the world. It is no easy mission. It is very often a frowned upon ministry. It even led its leader to the cross. But that's the nature of God's people and their home. God's home reaches out beyond the Ronald MacDonald House -- it is truly a place for those seeking a home-away-from-home.

That's why we call this place a Sanctuary -- it is a safe place for those looking for acceptance and shelter.



That's also why we call the altar the Table of the Lord. It is the one table to which everyone is invited who has a need for love and forgiveness and acceptance. It truly symbolizes why this is a "Home, Sweet Home" for everyone!

God help us to be more like the Loving Father than either of his two sons!!

AMEN.

MID-WEEK LENTEN SERVICE  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 16, 1988  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, "It is finished!" and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

John 19:30

What is your life story? Let's face it - your life story and mine aren't much different ... at least when it comes to FINISHING THINGS. More than likely, we could all write the same epitaph on our tombstones: "It was unfinished!" Isn't that the way we feel so often each day ... feeling like so many things are still hanging ... nothing is quite finished ... so many things yet to accomplish ... so many matters yet needing resolution.

On my really brave days - I sit in my office and make a list of the number of things that I still have to do! The list is staggering!! Just one area alone -- the calls that I could make ... the ones that I have not yet made ... the visitors I have not seen, the lonely that I have overlooked, the hurting that are out there, the ones who just would like someone to drop by and chat, the inactive who have lost their tie to any church ... etc. etc. Let's face it - there's a lot of unfinished business in our lives. There's a lot of cracks, a lot of holes, a lot of missing spaces and blanks to be filled. We aren't the perfect people that we like everybody to think we are. And all this unfinished business really gives me the GUILTS ... SOMETIMES EVEN MAKES ME WANT TO QUIT! I ask myself: ~~WIN~~ it ever be right? Will I ever finish? Will it all get done? Will I ever feel that it's the way I want it to be??

But once in a great while, we do get a brief glimpse of completion or fulfillment. Now and then something gets completed ... something seems perfect ... something turns out the way it was supposed to. It may be as simple as baking a good dish for the Lenten potluck ... or it may be as complex and negotiating a settlement for Jeep employees. But we've all had those brief moments when we finally feel fulfillment -- when at last we can say, "Ahhh ... at last everything is o.k. ... it's just right!"

That's the spirit of this word from the cross. Even in the tormented agony of his last breath, Jesus says, "It is finished." Everything is o.k. ... finally it's just right ... things are at last the way they're supposed to be.. Finally the bridge between heaven and earth is complete ... the bridge over troubled waters has been spanned. The greatest expression of divine love has been given to humanity -- one man's sacrifice HAS FINISHED GOD'S ULTIMATE ACT OF LOVE!

Jesus' last moment on Golgatha is like the builder who was laboring endlessly to finish the home for the newlywed couple before their wedding. One day ... when the sun had

had already set ... when he was feeling the aching fatigue of fifteen hours of sweaty labor ... he finally cries out to the couple, "At last, it is finished!! Come and see what I have done for you!"

Jesus' last moment on Golgatha is much like that builder. He was totally fatigued and famished from the brutality of the cross - but he was not despairing when he cried out: "It is finished!" Jesus Christ has finished building the mansion for his bride, the church. Jesus Christ had finally finished God's greatest construction project -- an eternal home with God ... a dwelling place that can never be taken away!!

On Golgatha - Jesus Christ completed God's business for each of us. The facts are -- as long as we are alive -- we will always be unfinished ... never quite done ... never quite ready to live fully or to die completely. But with this word, God makes absolutely certain THAT HE HAS PUT THE FINISHING TOUCH ON EVERY FAITHFUL LIFE. No longer do we have to fret and fume about our unfinished works. No longer do we have to feel forever guilty for the things that we just didn't quite finish. Our faithful relationship to God is no longer unfinished ... incomplete. God has finished it for us!! God has made it complete!! It is now finished!! "Tetelestai" -- totally done, totally finished through Jesus Christ!!

The Good News of this word from the cross is that God finishes what most of us leave unfinished ... incomplete: OUR LOVE FOR HIM AND FOR EACH OTHER! God assures us that he has already written the finally chapter of the story of our lives! He has finished, completed our love story!!

**GOD COMPLETES SALVATION - NOT US!**

So we can relax ... we can let go a little ... we can face each day without the fear that we have to accomplish it all ... and above all, we can even relax when it comes to death! Because with God there is no such thing as incompleteness ... an unfinished life. "It is finished!" God has completed the final stroke on the canvas. We can live ... and we can die IN PEACE ... because God has completed for us whatever we might leave incomplete.

Does that mean we "do nothing?" By no means. God's act of finishing is much like a composer. He has finished the greatest composition of reconciliation. He has paid the full price for the composition. Now begins the endless hours and days of playing the composition. We become the instruments of his symphony of love for life. **B**ut even when we don't play it perfectly - the composition is already perfectly finished for us. We don't have to fret over our failures -- for God has already perfectly fulfilled his symphony himself. Yes, thank God "it is finished!" Now, we enjoy the ecstasy of his symphony for all our days ... and finally experience it's perfect harmony in the dwelling place called heaven. AMEN.

LENT IV  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 29, 1987  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

**"IT'S ABOUT POWER PLAYS!"**

"Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave -- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Matthew 20:27-28

One thing must be said for Mrs. Zebedee -- she was a good Jewish mother!! In fact, she was even a good Christian mother! For what dedicated mother would not look out for her sons?!? If the kingdom was being ushered in - then she was going to be there at the head of the line making sure that Jimmy and Johnny got their positions of power!!

O.K. mothers -- would any of you have done it any differently? If Jesus was telling you that he was going to take his seat of glory -- and you had a chance to put in your request -- wouldn't you put in a good word for your own boys or girls? Let's face it -- none of us is too different from Mrs. Zebedee -- we too are looking for positions of honor for our children. Especially if our kids were as hard working and dedicated as James and John had been. They had given up good, lucrative fishing careers. The least Jesus could have done was to offer them FIRST CLASS SEATS IN THE KINGDOM. Yes, very few of us are much different from Mrs. Zebedee -- we like to make sure that our kids get their proper reward!!

I sincerely hope that all of you catch the wiff of humor in Matthew's version of this story. In Mark's version - the disciple's themselves ask for positions of greatness ... of power. Matthew makes the story a much more dramatic power play -- he gets their mother involved. It's a great, humorous touch regarding the Jewish mother syndrome.

But as I've already said -- Blanche Martyn didn't do it much differently. She was not a Jewish mother, but she didn't miss a chance for Michael or Peter. She was always looking out for seats of honor for her boys. And I hope many of you mothers and fathers continue to look out for good positions and opportunities for your children. That's just a natural part of parenting ... it shows that you really care! We all want our kids to have the very best - especially when they have worked hard and shown determination.

But there is a serious note of caution in this text for all of us. Like Mrs. Zebedee, sometimes our best intentions can be our worst teaching examples. Sometimes, even without intending it, we can be teaching our children to be status-seekers. Our whole aim can be a power play strategy -- an emphasis upon REWARDS rather than RESPONSIBILITIES! We make GREATNESS & POWER the goal rather than a gift of life.

I shared this same text with my Level III catechism class recently. I asked them to define for me "their understanding of what it means to be THE GREATEST." Here's a sampling of their responses: "to be almost perfect;" "to be better than everyone else;" "to be without sin;" "to be strong, handsome, pretty, & a good leader;" "to try harder than anyone else to succeed;" "to be wonderful." Not bad answers for 8th graders.

But even most of these answers alluded to "moral goodness" rather than "relational responsibility." Greatness or power was something to seek ... to get -- rather than an offering of the self. Is that what we really want to teach our children -- to manipulate their environment in order to gain status and power?? Is the model of living simply a game of power plays?? Is that why we believe in Jesus Christ -- to get some special reward for our belief?? Is that why we worship and study -- to earn some heavenly points?? Is that why we become members of this church -- to get some kind of heavenly insurance policy??

"Power" is obviously an essential ingredient of life -- it is not to be viewed as a negative thing. It is essentially the ABILITY TO GET THE JOB DONE. But what is the job?? What is the task of our faith?? What is the goal of believing in God?? For Mrs. Zebedee -- the goal of following Jesus was to get "a special seat" -- to be given a special reward. Faithfulness was a matter of "getting" - not a matter of "giving." Mrs. Zebedee had made faith into a manipulative "power play" -- my boys have been dedicated disciples, therefore my boys deserve the best seats!

In the gospel for this day, Jesus asks all of us: TO WHAT EXTENT HAVE WE MADE DISCIPLESHIP INTO A RELIGIOUS POWER PLAY? What do we teach? What do we believe? What do we model for our children about rewards and responsibilities?? Have we made life a game of power plays? And more tragically, have we made faith a power play to gain special favor with God??

Regretably, too often we have done both. In the realm of education, we often make grades the essence of learning. The reward of "good grades" replaces the responsibility of "graded growth." We make perfect marks the master of the minds. Wouldn't it be better to urge good study habits ... increased knowledge ... and academic discipline -- which all lead to IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY AND A BETTER CITIZENRY! How are we helping our children transcend the "reward" mentality of education. Or do we want them to develop a "union power play" mentality - which demands the big payoff, the big reward for little dedication or responsibility. Don't get me wrong -- I'm not saying all unions promote power plays for big rewards. But I am saying that faithful living gets beyond a "good grade" mentality. It teaches that sacrifice and service are correlated to grades and achievement! It teaches us to be more than status seekers.

And that's a power play we all know well. Like Mrs. Zebedee, we are all special "credit" seekers. In fact for most pastors, the motivating force for going into the ministry was the need to be needed! We like to see ourselves as compassionate and caring -- but we sometimes overlook the fact that "our caring profile" is often motivated by our need for recognition. Like the Zebedee boys, we are often "credit seekers" -- looking for a special seat of special recognition and respect with the Lord.

Jesus sets us straight on that score in this gospel. Mrs. Zebedee says - "Grant them special credit Lord -- put them at your left hand and right hand." And Jesus answers, "to put them at my right hand or left hand is not for me to grant." Could the answer be any clearer? The purpose of dedicated discipleship is not for "special credit." The aim of dedicated service in the church is not for special glory ... for special rewards. If that's what I've gone into the ministry for ... if that's what you've joined the church for ... if that's the reason that you're serving on a committee ... or giving generously -- THEN YOU'RE PULLING A POWER PLAY. In short, you're not seeking to get God's job done -- you're seeking glory for yourself.

So often I have heard people say about untimely deaths of dedicated disciples: "How could God allow such a thing?? Why did he have to suffer so much?? Why was she taken so quickly, she was such a caring and giving person?" For the truly dedicated of God -- we often expect "special rewards" -- we expect extra-long-life ...or deliverance from difficulty.

But Jesus says today: "That's not for me to grant." That's not the reason you're a disciple in the first place. That could be no better illustrated on this day for all of us than by the life of Carleton Carver. Here was a quiet, unassuming man. Here was a man who never sought his own glory. Here was a man who in sickness and health sought to be here thanking his Lord. Here was a man who gave thousands upon thousands of pledged dollars to the church every year -- but never asked for a single accolade or trumpet blast. Here was a man who drove himself to Toledo Hospital Friday morning ... and died shortly after noon that same day. But Carleton was not here Sunday after Sunday to seek "extra long life" for himself. He did not study in Lunches with Luther to stack up extra points with the Lord. He did not commit himself as the greatest giver of this church because he expected some special reward. He lived ... he loved ... he gave as a disciple of Christ BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A DISCIPLE -- NOT TO ASK FOR SPECIAL REWARDS, BUT TO OFFER SPECIAL SERVICE ... SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY ... SPECIAL SACRIFICE! That's the essence of Christian discipleship; and for all of us who have known Carleton -- we have been blessed with KNOWING THE CHARACTER OF TRUE SERVANTHOOD!!

But there is another angle. What if our power plays prove successful?? Well, the newspapers this week have certainly shown us what often happens when "we claim that we have established God's perfect kingdom on earth." Obviously, I'm referring to the tragic collapse of Jimmy Bakker's leadership of the PTL organization. Certainly, we do not condone Jim Bakker's tragic flaw. But in his downfall we see so clearly what happens when we claim "earthly perfection and greatness" -- when we do not identify with the rest of sinful humanity. EVENTUALLY, GOD HUMBLER US. In Bakker's case, God used an adulterous affair. For others who claim the reward of "earthly power and perfection," God will use other humbling experiences. But he will not allow his disciples to undercut his power and authority AS THEY SEEK THEIR OWN!!

I regret such a happening for Jim Bakker. But in the aftermath of this incident, we have seen the shortcomings of all these TV ministries which claim "perfect righteousness." We have heard their claims and counterclaims, we have seen their suits and countersuits -- and it is not all peace & unity between Baker and Swaggart - Falwell and Roberts. Nothing more graphically illustrates that the human condition of sin runs as deeply through these ministries as it runs through our lives and our ministries. TV evangelists would like us to believe that their sheets are always clean; but God will not allow such power plays to succeed. God's job can only "get done" when those who are involved are committed to more than their own power and glory!

And thankfully, dear friends in Christ, I still think that job was ordained by God to be done by the local church from local folks like yourselves -- not through the message and manipulation of the media. Obviously, there is a place for religious broadcasting. But by and large, Christ's servanthood is best shared and supplied through the person to person ministry of church folk who sweat and sing and suffer together Sunday after Sunday ... week in and week out. BECAUSE THE MESSAGE AND MINISTRY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH CONTINUES TO BE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PEOPLE -- NOT THE MANIPULATION OF THE MAGNANIMOUS MINISTER ON THE TUBE OR IN THE PULPIT!!

And that's the ultimate meaning of today's text: GOD CALLS US TOGETHER NOT FOR SPECIAL REWARDS, BUT FOR A SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY: namely, to drink the cup of sacrifice and suffering!! Or as Jesus clarifies: You are not here to be served, but to serve ... and like Jesus, to give your lives as a ransom for others!

That's why we baptize Brian Welshons today! Not to assure him of any earthly rewards as a Christian! In fact, quite to the contrary -- he is only assured that to follow Christ he will certainly experience sacrifice and possibly even have to suffer! But he is assured of eternal rewards -- namely, the everlasting forgiveness of his sin! What greater reward could any of us ever desire??

That's the challenge of our faith -- not to seek special power and praise and pomp for ourselves, but to fulfill the special responsibility of discipleship! TO SERVE, RATHER THAN BE SERVED! That's no easy assignment -- because it turns the world's expectations upside down. To have power in this world is so often to get special seats of honor and glory. To have power in God's kingdom is to offer special service. The question is not: what kind of glory can God give you, but rather what kind of service can you give God? Is your goal to SIT WITH JESUS, or TO WALK UP WITH HIM TO JERUSALEM?

Is it any wonder that we call this time our Lenten pilgrimage? It is a time to for walking the lonely road with Jesus -- not for merely sitting on some throne of pomp and glory. Faithful Christians always walk first with Jesus to suffer and die to themselves ... and then they look forward to the resurrection from the dead! That's the way it always is in God's kingdom -- service and sacrifice first, and then the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever.

AMEN.



LENT IV  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 10, 1991  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## "GETTING IT STRAIGHT!"

"By his grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God." Eph 2:9

"For God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

John 3:17

Our whole reason for being here today ... or any other day is summed up in seven words: "By his grace you have been saved." Everything else we do here - our liturgizing, our praying, our singing, our learning, our fellowshiping, our giving of ourselves, our sacrificing, our good deeds -- ALL THESE AND WHATSOEVER ELSE WE DO is a response to these seven words: "By his grace you have been saved."

As Lutherans - we teach these words, we preach these words, we sing about "that amazing grace," we talk about it at Lunches with Luther and Crossways, etc... and yet with all this constant emphasis, for much of our lives we really don't live by it. We don't seem to act as if we really believe in it. That was brought home to Lutherans a few years ago when the Search Institute did a study to isolate what really characterizes various denominations. When Lutherans were asked, "Do you really believe that you are saved?" more than 70% responded "that they had some questions or weren't sure!" We do a lot of talking and singing about "amazing grace," but when we're put to the test ... we seemingly don't trust "that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, and that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

The great German theologian, Karl Barth, once recalled a young man summarizing his faith as follows: "I don't have to go to church. I don't have to read the Bible. I already know what the church teaches and what the Bible says - it says: "Do what is right; and do unto others." This young man represents the faith of a lot of Christians; thousands of Christians have made the faith into a Golden Rule Religion.

Karl Barth's response to this was: "If this is the message at stake in Christianity - then we are all wasting our time listening to it. If the Christian gospel is merely, "Do what is right; and do unto others," then neither prophets, nor apostles, neither Bible, nor Jesus nor God are needed. For anybody can say that message to himself. You don't need God or Jesus to say: "Do what is right; and do unto others."

How tragic that many well-meaning Christians have summarized the faith into works-righteousness religion: DO WHAT IS RIGHT; AND DO UNTO OTHERS. There is no rescue,

there is no hope; there is no security in a religion which simply says: "Do what is right!" Obviously, we all agree with such a philosophy, but it won't help us when we are facing death, when we have lost a loved one, when we are filled with guilt, when we have again done what is wrong, when we have fallen short of the glory of God.

And today a new Golden Rule Religion has entered our age of self-actualization and self-sufficiency. Just like "do what is right; and do unto others," this religion also teaches the art of saving ourselves. It is called the New Age Movement. One of its chief proponents is actress Shirley McClaine. Like the old Golden Rule Religion, it replaces God with human principles of self-improvement. It has six major principles -- all which essentially say that humanity is destined to be equal with God. Humanity's only need, therefore, is to be transformed into the awareness of becoming the divinity. It says that true humanity is evolving toward divine nobility ... and we must simply direct our thoughts and actions toward this higher order of life. According to these tenets, any human being may say "I Am God," counting himself equal with Jesus; and being so divine, such humans are under no law and accountable to no one but themselves. How do you like that for the epitome of self-actualized egotism?!?

Is it any wonder that this world could produce a self-actualized, ego-maniac like Saddam Hussein. Obviously, he would not claim to be a member of the New Age Movement - but he reflects the same lawlessness and lack of accountability to anyone but himself. His religion is one of self-actualization -- trust only in yourself and your own vision of greatness and goodness, no matter what the human cost or atrocities!

You would think that after hundreds of years of civilization ... you would think that after decades of turmoil caused by the Mussolinis, the Stalins, the Hitlers, and the Husseins of the world ... you would think that after the multitude of wars and racial divisions and divorces and denomination squabbles and all the other powers of separation in this world - THAT WE WOULD HAVE COME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT SELF-RIGHTEOUS RELIGION ISN'T GETTING IT STRAIGHT! When we depend upon our own goodness, upon our own vision of righteousness, upon our own principles of justice -- we end up with dictatorial aggression, new age movements or the ego mania of nationalism. And all of these fall far short of the glory of the grace of God.

I rejoice that we have squelched dictatorial aggression; now we must be tempered in our ego mania. Be assured, I am glad to see a little revived patriotism in our land. Like you, I proud to be an American. And I am profoundly grateful for Stormin Norman and the professionalism of our troops in the Middle East. I rejoice in their tactical superiority and their dedication to getting the job done. They deserve a

heroes "welcome home!" But let us be cautious that we don't turn our success into mere boasting ... into pure self-glorification ... into a national deification of ourselves. Because then we have succumbed to trusting in our own power & good works, rather than in the grace and goodness of God who inspired us to be good and honorable in the first place.

Maybe I can better illustrate as Pastor Jeff illustrated last week with his deep gratitude regarding our troops' character in the field. I too have been deeply moved by the spirit and sensitivity of our troops. But the most moving example for me was of the surrendering Iraqi troops coming up to one of our men ... and that soldier reassuring those troops by offering his hand and saying: "You're going to be o.k. ... you're going to be o.k." Dear friends in Christ - that is not what you and I would naturally do in combat. By nature, our vision of goodness is to beat up on the other guy -- and that's esp. the way we respond in the heat of battle. What we saw from the American G.I. in Iraq can only be described as the GRACE OF GOD. Instead of condemnation, instead of death, instead of beating his enemy to a pulp - that soldier offered those Iraqis "amazing grace" ... the undeserved love of God.

That American G. I. did not come to that moment of grace by his own nature. WE DON'T GET IT STRAIGHT BY OURSELVES. We get it straight by having the Word of God poured into our lives from the beginning until the end of time. And the incredible Word that God pours into our lives from the beginning is that we are LOVED not because we are good ... but because we are his, we are a vital part of his cherished family. That was that same word the G.I. offered to those Iraqi soldiers. He was not LOVING them because they were good or because they deserved it ... he was LOVING THEM and giving them LIFE because he recognized them as a vital part of God's cherished family.

That is the Word that God pours into our lives from the moment of Baptism -- that we are loved NOT BECAUSE we are by nature pure and perfect and good and wholesome ... but that we are loved because we are cherished as his children. "By his grace you have been saved ... not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are HIS WORKMANSHIP, created in Jesus Christ for good works ... that we should walk in them."

That's why we baptize Jacob St. Aubin today as an infant. And that's why our new members today affirm the same promise made in baptism. Because in Holy Baptism we are reminded that God is the one who graces us, who transforms our lives, who changes us from sinners into saints, who adopts us even while we are dead in our own trespasses in order that we might be made alive TO BE LIKE Christ. We only GET IT STRAIGHT when we depend upon God's goodness and let his love shine to overcome the darkness of the world.

Today, Jacob St. Aubin experiences for the first time the dramatic touch of God's hand. It is always a hand of grace -- a hand which reaches out and cleanses us ... a hand which washes away our filth and greed ... a hand which holds us secure and yet tenderly ... a hand which reaches out and says, "you're going to be o.k. - don't worry, you're going to be o.k." But Jacob will need more than one touch of this hand of God ... he will need water washed over his head hundreds of more times than the three offered in Baptism. Week after week after week, he will need to be cleansed and purified and forgiven by his parents, his sponsors, his friends, and most especially by this family, the church. BAPTISM SIMPLY SYMBOLIZES WHAT NEEDS TO BE HAPPENING IN HIS LIFE FROM THIS DAY FORWARD. Hopefully, Jacob will always find hands in church which will reach out and cleanse him ... which will hold him secure and tender ... which will always say to him: "You're going to be o.k. Jacob -- because here you have been adopted by God, here you are cherished as one of his children - here is one place in the world where you will always experience the grace and goodness of God. As Jeff said last week, here is where God is all wrapped up in us!

And as Jacob continues to experience that dramatic touch of God's hand in this place -- one day he too will encounter life's battlefields. And when his enemies come out of their trenches -- you can be certain that Jacob will offer them the hand of God. He will say to them: "You're going to be o.k. - you're going to be o.k., because you have found someone who has been saved by God's grace ... you have found someone who has been renewed by the death of Jesus Christ ... you have found someone who will love you with the same amazing grace first given to him by God his Father.

But we all know, don't we -- there will be many times that Jacob will be beaten down - in his neighborhood, in school, in college, in his job, sometimes even by his own family, and yes, even in the life of the church. Sometimes instead of the hand of God, Jacob will be offered a fist or the fuming anger of the world. Some people will tell him to shut up when all he's trying to do is show the exuberance of a child. Just like all of us, he will be pushed and shoved, he will be laughed at and mocked, and sometimes he will even be persecuted unfairly. Just like his Lord, being a Christian will not mean that he will be able to avoid the cross. He will probably not have to die on the cross, but he will learn only too soon why Jesus had to die on the cross -- in order that he, Jacob, might be saved from the damning power of this world and the doom of death.

Yes, Jacob will finally GET IT STRAIGHT - that not by his own goodness is he saved, but only by the grace and goodness of God. And he will confirm his faith in that grace of God; and then he will seek to grace others with the same love that he has first received. And when he takes his last breath, he will be assured by the same hand that reached out to touch him today saying: "Don't be afraid, Jacob ... you're going to be o.k. - for nothing can separate you from my love, which is yours in Jesus Christ, now and forever. AMEN."

LENT IV  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 26, 1995  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## "THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME!"

*"But the father said to the slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate!" Luke 15:22-24*

As many of you know, I was born in central Wisconsin in a town of 40,000 -- Oshkosh B'Gosh! As a boy, I remember Oshkosh had a bustling downtown. I used to go to the downtown fire dept and sit on the big hook-'n-ladder truck. I fondly remember my grade school, junior high and high schools; they all seemed so huge to me when I was a boy. Yes, Oshkosh B'Gosh was my home town for over 30 years.

But as I got older and returned to Oshkosh - it all seemed so different. The white bungalow on Melvin Avenue that was my home for over 25 years seemed so much smaller than it once was. The bustling downtown began to look more like a 19th century ghosttown. The kids I grew up with could never be found when I went back home; even the church where I first responded to a "Call to Ministry" seemed less warm and friendly. And with my return in 1989, both of my parents were now dead. That really changed Oshkosh B'Gosh for me. I returned a few times after 1989, but when it came to Oshkosh B'Gosh, I could no longer say "there's no place like home."

Some of you are yet more fortunate than me. Some of you still go back to that town and that home from which you once came. You still have family there; and maybe you're even lucky enough to have a few friends back home. Luckily, your mom and dad may still be alive ... and maybe they've even saved "your room" just the way it always was in your white bungalow or whatever your house looked like. I'm glad there's still a place back home for you. But for me and probably for hundreds of others just like me ... "back home" is no longer where "there's no place like home."

What this says is that whether we still have a "childhood home-town" or not, there is one thing we will always need: A PLACE WE CAN CALL HOME! This kind of home is always more than a residence ... even though it can also be a residence. But this kind of home is where we feel total intimacy with God and the whole creation; this is the place that we feel AT ONE WITH EVERYTHING. **It is that place where we know that we are totally cared for and fully confident that we will never be betrayed ... never be left alone ... never be without guidance or truth.** Obviously, our residential homes should be such places; God-like places, where we experience intimacy and care and confident guidance and support. But we know sometimes our homes are not reflections of God-like goodness. All of us are still living with the horror of a young mother who allowed her two small sons to roll down a boat ramp into a lake to their deaths. Those two little boys had a home, but it certainly was not a God-like residence. It was not a home that could be trusted

for guidance, compassion, forgiveness and everlasting acceptance.

Well, today's parable presents us with the model of a God-like home. In fact, many scholars say that this parable should be renamed the Parable of the Prodigal Father. Prodigal means either "wasteful" or "extremely extravagant." And scholars say that the father was far more extravagant in his love than the son was wasteful in loose living. And that is exactly the point the parable wants to make: **TO SHOW THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF GOD'S LOVE ... that wherever one can be confident of extravagant love, there's no place like that home.**

We see that extravagant love right from the beginning of the story. First, the son requests his inheritance. In the biblical world, there was no greater insult ... for to request your inheritance was to imply that in your own mind your father was already dead. Yet, here was a father who would not coerce his son to remain in his house. Opening himself up for all kinds of gossip and rumors in the community (which would still happen today), the father allows his son to leave home and learn the lessons of failure on his own.

There is both a theological and practical point shown in this father's extravagant generosity. First, God forces no one to remain in his household of faith who chooses to be foot-loose and fancy-free. But like any good parent, God watches with silent tears in his heart as he sees his children make the foolish mistake of thinking they can get along without any connection or nurture "from home."

There is a very good application of this point for me and others here in leadership at Hope Lutheran. Most of us work very hard to plan and organize and promote and uplift programs of ministry that we believe reflect the goodness of God. It gets very frustrating when leaders believe they are offering outstanding expressions of God's goodness and only a small numbers respond faithfully. The temptation is to get angry; the temptation is to make people feel guilty for not "coming home to God" for the good news. I have to confess - at times I have conveyed this spirit. Please forgive me ... and forgive the staff ... and forgive any such leaders. **Because this parable teaches that we dare not force or intimidate God's children into being nurtured at home.** Just like the father himself in the parable - we know that what we offer here is the gracious and compassionate Word of the Father. **If people are too foolish or too busy ... going off and living their own lifestyle of the "famous and the rich" ... "thinking they have a better way (like the young son)" ... then like the Father, we must grit our teeth and wait 'til they come to their senses.** Much of our society today is just like the young son. They have made their idea of "home" into material wealth or physical & sexual pleasures. The father teaches his church to let them go and do their silly things. Eventually they will all realize how empty their lives have become.

And that of course leads to the second and final point of the parable: that a true home is where the father is waiting with open arms of extravagant forgiveness and mercy. Obviously, one important thing had to happen to the

son before he came back home. He had to admit to himself that he was wrong in turning his back on Dad. **In short, he had to repent -- he had to turn around and go back home.** The late Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen once said: "The tragedy of life is not that we are sinners, but that we are sinners who refuse to admit it!" This boy finally came to his senses and admitted that he was responsible for the mess of his own life. One of these days we pray that our own culture will finally come to its senses ... admitting that God is not responsible for the mess of our world, but that we are ... admitting that we desperately need guidance and renewal from the Father!!

But the great news of today's gospel is seen in the stance of the father: **that he rejoices over the return of his son!** Isn't that the heart of any good father or mother ... always rejoicing over the return of a son or daughter who comes home to be embraced. There was no scolding; there was no guilt-trip; there was no grounding for three years because of earlier rebellion. Instead of a son slinking back into town, this father allowed his rebellious son to return with dignity and grace. He kisses his son, a greeting given only to equals. He honors the boy with a ceremonial robe. He places shoes on his feet and a ring on his finger -- signs of freedom and authority. And he orders a gala celebration.

Here is the other theological and practical point for us from the parable: **the church is to be God's home of reckless and extravagant forgiveness.** This parable teaches that there is one reality to which the church can be recklessly wasteful: THE FORGIVING LOVE OF GOD! In all other things we are called to be good stewards; but with His love, we are commanded to be recklessly wasteful! How reckless do you think we have been with his grace at Hope Lutheran?? Would a stranger enter into our midst today and feel that we were ready to give him/her a party ... that we really rejoice to have a lost one come home??? Do people leave this place on Sunday morning or any other time and say: "**Now there's no place like home that's better than Hope Church!?!"** Have we made this a home away from home for the lost, the lonely, the homeless, the hungry or just anyone whose looking for guidance and support? Or, like the older brother, have we only made this a home for those who can brag about how hard they have worked and deserve better treatment??

All I can say is ... I hope we are trying to make this more than a "home" for insiders ... I hope we will always try to make the lost feel at home at Hope. And yet when we compare ourselves to the father in the parable, we know there are miles and miles to go before we "can sleep" and be really "at home!" But we're on the way ... thanks be to God for all of your embracing love. So let's go out of here today singing a great "homecoming song." Please join me:

"Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling!"

AMEN.

*IV Sunday in Lent  
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 9, 1997  
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor*

## **“YOU CAN DEPEND UPON IT!”**

*“But God made us alive together with Christ -- by grace you have been saved.” o*

*Ephesians 2:5*

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

*John 3:16-17*

**Our whole reason for being in this place is summed up in six words: “By grace you have been saved!” Everything else we do -- our liturgies, our prayers, our forums, our educational programs, our sacrificial giving ... even the beautiful parties for saints like Celia Findlay -- ALL THESE & WHATSOEVER ELSE we do are simply responses to these six words: “By grace you have been saved!”**

**Some people (like Celia) respond GRATEFULLY to these words by living almost in the image of God; others barely respond to them at all. Most of us are somewhere in between -- sometimes very alive to grace ... other times barely lukewarm to grace. But we have all been rescued from the ultimate defeat of life and hopelessness ONLY BY THE GRACE (unconditional love) OF GOD!!**

**“By his grace you have been saved!” What do we mean when we say “saved?” Quite simply -- we have been made acceptable and worthwhile in God’s sight! And that’s a miracle -- because if we relied upon ourselves, we would be unacceptable and often worthless in God’s sight! And we have certainly seen a world that is relying more and more upon itself. Has all this self-reliance made this world a safer place ... a more serene place ... a place that is no longer has any dangers of perishing?? Like it or not -- every one and every thing in this world is daily perishing!! It’s the oldest message of the Bible: we can’t SAVE OURSELVES!**

**There is only one place ... only one place in the world where we can hear & receive Good News about all the tragedy of perishing life: in the sanctuary of Almighty God!! Only His Word, and His Word alone SAVES LIFE!! Every other manual of life ... every other religious book or guru ... every other management prospectus tells you and me that we CAN SAVE ourselves ... by what we do ... by our own genius ... by our own good deeds!! Holy Scripture is the only unique & different Word in the world: *“By his grace you are saved!”***

**Karh Barth, the great 20th century theologian remembers somebody telling him: “I don’t have to go to church; I don’t have to read the Bible; I already know what the church teaches & what the Bible says: It says - ‘Do what is right and do unto others.’” Barth responded: *“If this is the message at stake in Christianity--then we’re wasting our time listening to it. If our message is simply, ‘Do what is right, and do unto others’ then neither prophets or apostles, the Bible, Jesus nor God are needed. For anybody can say that message to himself. You***



don't need God to say, 'Do what is right' or 'Do unto others!' But you do need God to say: "By grace, by my mercy, you are saved!"

There is no guarantee of hope or trust or worthfulness in the message, 'Do what is right' or 'Do unto others.' There is no message of relief for me or you in that message when we are faced with a major crisis. Tell the people in southern Ohio or Arkansas or Kentucky -- tell them, 'Do what is right,' 'Do unto others' -- in the midst of their pain & misery & floods! They need a God who says: "I will be there to have mercy upon you! I will get a rescue team for you!" They need a God who can be powerfully trusted to free & help them from tragedy. It's like the story of the co-ed who wrote her parents this letter:

*Dear Mom & Dad, I'm sorry it's been so long since I wrote, but all my paper was destroyed the other night in the dormitory fire from the demonstrators who torched us. I'm out of the hospital now, and the doctors say my eyesight will return soon. ... A wonderful black man, Bill, rescued me from the fire and has kindly offered to share his apartment with me until the dorm is rebuilt. He comes from a fine inner-city family, so you won't be surprised when I tell you we're getting married. And since you love children so much -- you'll be so happy to learn that next summer you'll become proud grandparents.*

*Now mom & dad, before reading any further, disregard the paragraph above. There was no fire; I haven't been hospitalized; I don't have any boyfriends; and I'm not pregnant. However, I did get two D's on my grade report ... and I wanted to be certain that you received the news in the proper perspective.*

*Love, your daughter, JOY*

This story classically illustrates how we often fear depending upon the love and mercy OF EVEN THOSE CLOSEST TO US. We're never quite sure that even our parents will offer us grace: Joy was fearful that her parents might reject her because of the bad grades. She feared rejection and hostility, simply because she had failed ... she had not done "what was right!" Just like Joy, no one in this world is SECURE or SAFE just "knowing what is right!"

We all live in the same arena with Joy. Whether it's college, corporation, or church -- we often live in fear of someone or something because we know deep down WE CAN'T ALWAYS BE RIGHT ... WE OFTEN MISS THE MARK! We are often prisoners of our own flaws ... and of the flaws of the world around us. We are held captive by all kinds of powers -- greed, graft, gullibility, anger, anxiety, confusion, fear, and a host of others. And we keep on asking: WHOM CAN WE REALLY TRUST?? WHO CAN I REALLY BELIEVE IN??

No matter how long we live ... or how hard we work ... we can never be totally free from this agony and imprisonment with imperfection!! From the beginning of creation -- God knew we needed a greater source of strength and guidance! He knew we could not merely rely upon ourselves! And He kept on giving us that Word through kings, prophets & great leaders. And we kept on going our own way. Finally, he had to step into this world in person ... and he had to suffer death on the cross himself IN ORDER TO SHOW A STUBBORN WORLD THAT HE TRULY IS A MERCIFUL & FORGIVING GOD!

So it is that God offers us the ultimate Word from on high: "By grace you have been saved!!" God's Word always comes into our lives to free us from yesterday's incompleteness ... from yesterday's guilts ... from yesterday's faults ... from the crises of yesterday that just never stop!! "By grace you have been saved" means that we can look to the future with HOPE, because our destiny is not dependent upon our words or deeds ... our own mistakes or tragedies.

We all know that we live in a very wealthy country. But we too often forget that our greatest wealth is NOT OUR MONEY. That was classically illustrated one day when a student asked anthropologist, Margaret Mead, for the earliest sign of civilization. He expected the answer to be a "clay pot" or "fish hook" or possibly a "grinding stone." Her answer was a "Healed Femur."

She went on to say -- there are no "healed femurs" where the law of the jungle is practiced -- where "survival of the fittest" reigns. A healed femur shows that someone was cared for. Someone had to do the injured person's hunting & gathering until that person's leg healed. Thus - a healed femur - is the evidence of compassion and mercy ... the greatest symbols of a rich civilization.

In a wealthy society like ours -- the greatest question is not about our money -- but rather: Is our society RICH IN MERCY AND COMPASSION?? Do we know that our greatest mission is TO HEAL ... NOT TO BRAG ABOUT HOW RICH & POWERFUL WE ARE?!? Do we live by the greatest symbol of our faith -- the healing of THE CROSS -- or is it just another piece of jewelry to show others HOW WELL OFF WE ARE!!

That was graphically illustrated for me while yet in seminary. In preaching class, we used video tapes to analyze our preaching and to assess our group dynamics. One of our colleagues continually boasted of HOW GREAT HE WOULD BE AS A PASTOR. Yet, we were ALL suspicious of him. His life had been full of disappointments and bitterness. He had had many bad breaks, and was always trying to impress us that he was in control --nothing rattled him!

It came time to preach. He stood before us and shouted & screamed Bible verses at us. In thunderous judgmental tones, he let us know that the "good Lord" was ready to pounce on us as sinful pastors. He swirled to the right and left -- and constantly was shaking his fist at us in righteous anger. The sermon was a booming, blasting, emotional tirade.

And then the next Thursday, it came time for our analysis of his sermon. You guessed it - he didn't show up. A second time was arranged; and again he didn't show up. It was obvious why he wasn't there. He knew deep down what all the shouting was about! It wasn't about the gospel ... it had to do with the mask that he had been wearing to cover up his hostility. He used his preaching and the pulpit to unload his bitterness & hostility about his own life. He was using God's Word to hide his own despair ... and claiming it was God's Word, not his!

Finally, the TV technician arranged for a private viewing. He came; he watched; and he wept ... and he wept, and he wept. And when he came out to the rest of the group -- he was still weeping! And we held him ... and we let him continue to weep so that all the self-hatred that had built up inside of him could finally come out!!

As he wept, he was finally letting God's power of mercy enter his life! He was finally letting God free him from all the mistakes of the past. For the first time in a long time -- this man finally knew the meaning of "by grace you have been saved!" He finally let God heal the femur that he had been trying to walk and had crippled his life for years!!

We call that a "grace moment" -- a time where we finally realize we are acceptable to God & others in spite of our flaws and disappointments. Every time we gather in this sanctuary -- we are celebrating that GRACE MOMENT! We are asking God to deliver us from our pompous pretensions ... from our past hostilities ... LETTING GO OF ALL THAT IS PUTRID & POISON ... and hanging onto the mercy, compassion & grace of God.

The story of this man's life is not only his story. This is also the story of Peter Martyn. There's a lot of weeping I still need to do ... to let go and let God grace me instead of relying on myself!! But that's not only my story - it's yours as well. We all need to get down on our knees more often & thankfully cry to God for his grace saying: "Thank you, Lord, for having mercy on a wretch like me!"

For let's face it -- many of us spend too much of our time TRYING TO JUSTIFY OURSELVES ... TRYING TO FOOL THE WORLD THAT IT IS TOTALLY DEPENDENT UPON US & OUR GREATNESS. And then we wonder why we live in anger and disappointment when the world betrays us for somebody who looks better or acts better. God deliver us from this foolish self-sufficiency and self-righteousness.

There is only ONE we can really depend upon IF WE WANT TO BE HEALED! We have to look up to the cross ... and there we see one who offers mercy, forgiveness and compassion. And his mercy doesn't keep on shifting with the changing sands of time. That son was sent into the world NOT TO CONDEMN anyone -- but to save us with His love. And that's the gospel truth - AND YOU CAN DEPEND UPON IT!!

AMEN.