

TRINITY XX
Redeemer Lutheran Church - Milwaukee
October 15, 1972

Rev. Peter R. Martyn

"YOU"RE INVITED"

"And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast; but they would not come." (Matthew 22: 1-3)

You are invited. I am invited. We have been invited into God's kingdom. The kingdom of heaven. Since you have responded to the invitation how would you describe his kingdom? What would you say if someone asked: Describe the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven for me.

I think some would say that his kingdom is like a prison. It's a kingdom of do's and don't's. It's a kingdom where man is handcuffed by proper codes. It's a kingdom of pigeon holes, denominations, categories, and other human segregations.

Still others would say his kingdom is like a drab and dreary house. A place where people wear long faces and wring their hands over the terrible way things are going in the world. A place where there is no laughter, no crying children, no embracing, no lively moving or singing. It's a kingdom likened unto a graveyard.

Yet still others would say his kingdom is like a wayside station. A place off the main road away from the traffic of life. A place of pure comfort and isolation. A "me-and-my-God" place, where the pain, pleasure and perversion of others will never touch me.

And then still many others would say his kingdom is like a castle-in-the-sky. A fantasy world in the wild blue yonder. A Disneyland perched on top of the clouds with St. Peter operating hell's trapdoor or heaven's turnstyle.

I must admit, I would not be very excited with an invitation to any of these kingdoms. And I don't think Jesus would be either. For the kingdom of heaven by HIS description IS NOT a DETENTION CENTER, not a PURITAN'S SUNDAY PARLOR, PLEASURE PALACE up there somewhere.

Jesus says the kingdom of God may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son. The kingdom then is a feast of joy-a feast of fellowship-a fellowship, a UNION with God. It is celebrated NOW and in the ETERNAL FUTURE. It is the celebration of an ETERNAL UNION with God.

Today and everyday you and I ARE INVITED to that feast-a feast of victory, because UNION with God promises eternal victory.

And so, since marriage is the celebration of a UNION, Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven in terms that even a child can understand. A MARRIAGE FEAST. So we need only look at the ingredients of a marriage feast to understand why WE DO RESPOND to the invitation to God's kingdom.

Three ingredients of a marriage feast STAND OUT in my mind: PREPARATION - PRAYER - and PRAISE. We respond to the marriage invitation because of preparation, prayer, and praise.

A marriage union just "does not happen." Much preparation goes into it. I don't mean a big extravagant wedding - I just mean the average marriage feast. I remember one which might be illustrative.

The couple lived 400 miles apart during the last year and one half before the feast. That made time together more valuable.

The couple was forced to concentrate upon the meaning of a lifelong commitment. They already experienced the emptiness of separation.

They desired God's counsel for their relationship. Their pastor lived two hundred miles distance from each of them. Yet they say him regularly.

They began reading the church's wedding service a year before their marriage. They studied the history of Christian marriage. They reshaped the liturgy so that God would speak through them, since the partners in marriage are the ministers of the covenant.

They counseled with their parents, discouraging the frills of marriage. Finally, they together prepared the guest list. They invited FRIENDS AND FAMILY who really knew them. Who really cared. Who really would participate in the liturgy of the marriage feast.

A life-long union requires MUCH PREPARATION. And because of that preparation, a couple expects their invited guests to take the INVITATION SERIOUSLY. They expect their guests to be present for the ENTIRE MARRIAGE FEAST- because they have put many long hours into the EXPRESS ON of their union.

Likewise, the kingdom of God "just does not happen." Much preparation must go into God's union with us, and our union with him.

And he has done much preparation. He has revealed his love for us through centuries of prophets, teachers, and pastors. He has embraced us ~~daily~~ continually through his son, Jesus. He has sacrificed life itself to make his love known to us. He has perpetually provided us with an eternal dowry of gifts.

And now and eternally, he invites us to a union with him. And he expects his invited guests to take his INVITATION SERIOUSLY. And so as we have accepted and responded to the invitation TODAY, he asks us to PREPARE DAILY to do the same ... and we do know that we sometimes ONLY respond to the invitation periodically -- or on Sunday morning.

Secondly, a marriage feast is NOT without prayer. A couple needs time for DIRECTION and REFLECTION for their life together.

But I am not referring to the formal prayers which are often divorced from life. Nor am I suggesting that a couple should recite to one another from a book of marriage prayers.

I am referring to the proper of conversation -- talking to one another as if God were present directing the reflection. Such prayer means CONFESSING to one another weaknesses and fears. It means affirming each other's strengths and unique gifts. It means looking directly at each other and exposing one another's hidden desires and needs. It often means EMBRACING for the love of God is MORE THAN WORDS.

These are prayers shared by a couple at the pizza parlor, at the football game; in the solitude of the living room after the rest of the family has gone to bed.

Likewise, the invitation to God's kingdom is NOT without prayer. Our union with God, like our union with one another, cannot survive without conversation. As man stops reflecting with God, he loses God's direction. Man's union with God dissintegrated; leaving men in charge of human destiny.

And so, much of our present world finds itself in this position. Scientific man has largely discontinued his reflection with God -- he has often claimed Omnipotence himself. He no longer needs God's panoramic vision. He feels NO weakness - he admits NO limitations - he's got the whole world in his hands.

And then frustrations, tears, chaos and death intrude into his life. So he turns to drugs and tranquilizers for direction. So his direction BECOMES an escape from reality. In his dulled or mind-expanded consciousness, he doesn't feel he has to confront his impotent self.

We have not chosen this escapist route today. Let us continue to reflect with God, and pray for his direction in our work and play tomorrow.

Finally, in the marriage feast and union, A couple praises God. Preparation and prayer has brought NEW JOY - GREATER SECURITY-INCREASED HAPPINESS AND PLEASURE INTO THEIR UNION. And as guests of a wedding feast, we are invited to share their joyful praise and thanksgiving.

My friends, how do you leave from a marriage feast? I hope you leave as I always leave -- thoroughly INTOXICATED with the JOY of a new LOVING RELATIONSHIP in God. And I didn't say thoroughly intoxicated -- I said throughly intoxicated with JOY-- the joy that comes with a UNION of love.

We leave the feast THANKING God that his live can bring TWO THOROUGHLY UNIQUE PERSONS into a life-long union. And we leave MOST READY and MOST WILLING to tell many others about the JOY that we have just shared.

And that's exactly why we've come here today. To leave and tell others about the joy OF THE UNION that we've celebrated at the feast with God.

We've again been united with God. We've shared a fortaste of the kingdom of heaven. In sharing God's presence in WORK AND

PENTECOST XX
Luth Church of the Master - Troy
October 20, 1974

"THANKS, I NEEDED THAT!"

I give thanks to God, whom I serve with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did.
I thank him as I remember you always in my prayers, night and day.

I remember your tears, and I want to see you very much, so that I may be filled with joy. I remember the sincere faith you have, the kind of faith that your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice also had. I am sure that you have it also.

FOR THIS REASON, I remind you to keep alive the gift that God gave to you when I laid my hands on you. For the Spirit that God has given us does not make us timid; instead his Spirit fills us with power, love, and self-control.

(2 Tim. 1:3-7)

We've all encountered times when we need to be lovingly slapped into proper perspective. T.V. ad for shaving lotion - has a man doggedly facing a new day. After a slap of the lotion, he is awakened ANEW to life and says: "Thanks, I needed that."

Timothy: a very close associate of Paul.
the church was just getting organized
Timothy was encountering much resistance
He needed to be bolstered up
And so we have letter to him: OOZING with a personal and pastoral tone. I'm sure Timothy finished the letter saying: "Thanks, I needed that!"

This letter, attributed to Paul, had the same effect upon me. Personal - Pastoral quality has left me saying: "Thanks, Paul, I needed that -- and I need to share that letter from my personal perspective today.

Letter opens: I give thanks to God, whom I serve with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did.

Powerful statement: "whom I serve with a clear

conscience" - Who else? What else do I serve
with a clear conscience?

Yes - to hear Paul's letter surely bolsters
my relationship to God.

Paul continues: I thank him that I remember
you always in my prayers, night and day.

How much I need to share that with you!! In
four months, I have so deeply come to know the
presence of God in each of you. How often in
those prayers I have feared the loss - the
transfer of just one family here.....

Yes - to hear Paul's letter reminds me of
my prayers of thanks for your presence in
this ministry.

Paul continues: I remember the sincere faith
you have - the kind of faith that your grandmother
Lois and mother Eunice also had.

I can only believe that your parents had to be
like Lois and Eunice. What greater
gift can a child be given than the loving
fellowship of Christ!?! ,.....

Yes - to hear Paul's letter reminds me today
how thankful I must be FOR YOUR ANCESTORS --
most of whom I've never met. But they are
truly the building blocks for this church.

So - what more can I say? ONLY what Paul has
already said. For this reason I remind you
to keep alive the gift that God has given to you.

And what is that gift? A FAITH - A WAY TO LIVE
WITH A CLEAR CONSCIENCE. A gift of love - A way
to be forgiven, and to forgive. A gift of
a fellowship a gift of an
eternal union with him.

There are many ways that you and I can show our
thankfulness for these gifts to us. One thing is
for certain - if we are truly grateful for these
gifts - especially the gift of this fellowship,
then we will gather to talk about its future.
That opportunity will be ours beginning next
Sunday evening & three nights following.

.....
I look forward to sharing God's Spirit with
you at that time - a Spirit which does not
make us timid, but fills us with power,
love, and self-control.

May we pray for the strength of this power,
love, and self-control as we prepare to map
out our mission for '75.

Amen

.....

.....

.....

.....

PENTECOST XX - World Communion Sunday
Luth Church of the Master
Oct. 5, 1975

"COME TO THE COSMIC REUNION"

"May you always be joyful in your life in the Lord. I say it again, rejoice! . . . In conclusion, my brothers, fill your minds with those things that are good and deserve praise: things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and honorable. Philip. 4:4,8

(THEME: ONLY when we come to the realization that our joy is based on God's mercy can we truly rejoice and be at peace & united with all people.)

Should you ever need a good model for a "Thank You" note, turn to Paul's letter to the Philipians. It's Paul's happiest letter - he uses the word "joy" 12 times. The whole letter has a life-giving, positive ring to it. It's only 4 chaps - read it when you're feeling down. One would think that Paul had written this after a great faith experience.

Quite to the contrary - Paul wrote the letter while awaiting trial in prison. He had been forsaken by his friends and many of the congregations he had established. Only one church body showed Paul God's mercy - the Church of Philippi.

So Paul responds with a beautiful thank you note. Paul thanks the Philipians FOR ACTIVATING God's mercy -- for again making known the mercy of God.

Need I say that Paul COULD HAVE grumbled to the Philipians about his failures. HE COULD HAVE bitterly denounced his associates and the churches that had deserted him. HE COULD HAVE complained about the lousy treatment he was getting in jail. HE COULD HAVE worried about the outcome of his trial. HE COULD HAVE profaned God for allowing him to be captured & imprisoned while being such a dedicated apostle.

Yes, HE COULD HAVE reacted in all these ways. But instead, he rejoiced and thanked God for his merciful example through the Church of Philippi. Through the family of the Philipians, Paul could be confident that God still saw him as a worthy follower. Thru Philippi, Paul knew God affirmed & accepted him -- NOT BECAUSE he was a perfect apostle - but because God's nature is to be merciful when we have been beaten by our own sins or those of others.

How much we all need to know that God does not desert us on the basis of our failures. When I take an inventory of this past week, how easy it is to allow my failures and guilt to BLOT OUT God's mercy - esp. the mercy he offers through each of you.

I am reminded how I planned 8 special family visits and accomplished only 3.

I recall Monday's budget meeting and how grossly short we have fallen of our mortgage payments - and what that means for next year.

I recall the times of taking my family for granted this week

I think of the new fretting over a costly investment that must be made.

I agonize over the family that continues to reject their child on the basis of past mistakes.

Yes, we all know how the failures must be taken seriously - and how they must be confessed, but also how they can stifle us if that's what controls our lives. For our failures simply make us feel worthless and hopeless. And unlike Paul, you and I who are not imprisoned oftne feel enslaved by our failures (sin).

And so God gives us Paul's "Thank You" note. And we're reminded that Thru Christ God does not leave us sulking. He knows our human failures and corruption - and he offers us his mercy through the Sacrament.

^{So} And as we celebrate World Communion Sunday - we are reminded that God invites the whole cosmos to receive his mercy. We are celebrating

a cosmic reunion today - God is uniting us to his total family. He is reminding us INDIVIDUALLY and AS A WORLD FAMILY that we are acceptable to him.

In coming to his table - he reminds us to put away our sinful deeds and again be affirmed and accepted as worthy children. Not because we have earned his stamp of approval. But because he knows we need it - we need his acceptance - we need to feel worthy - we need affirmative love, and it is HIS NATURE TO GIVE THESE.

AND ONCE RECEIVED - he beckons us TO MAKE IT OUR NATURE. We do not leave his table empty - he offers us ~~the~~ presence of mercy - we leave his table TO PRACTICE HIS PRESENCE.

Three recent & bizarre figures illustrate how important OUR REGULAR REUNION with God's presence is. How important it is to share God's presence at this table -- and to share that same presence at our family tables.

These three bizarre figures are Lynette Fromme, Patty Hearst, and Sara Jane Moore. To read the story of Lynette Fromme is to read of a youngster who was thrown out of her family - who felt too young to cope with life alone, and who allowed herself to become the virtual slave of Charles Manson and his demonic "family."

Patty Hearst - polite, middle class, smiling, lighthearted, suddenly joins a revolutionary "family" and takes to carrying machine guns into banks. And Sara Jane Moore, pathetic, middle-aged powerless, who whimpers her conviction about her life: "There comes a time when the only way you can make a statement is to pick up a gun."

What did these three women have in common -- they felt impotent -- unloved -- unwanted -- unacceptable -- they believed they were cut off from genuine family relationships. And in desperation to establish some self-esteem -- to feel like they were worth something -- they turned to violence.

The purpose of the reunion we share at this table is to make us feel acceptable - loved -- wanted - to give us self-esteem even when we have failed. God hopes, that like the Philipians, we will carry that purpose into our homes AND into our society.

The tables of our homes and businesses are to be places where we are built up in love, rather than torn down. Lynette Fromme, Patty Hearst, and Sara Jane Moore evidently did not feel God's mercy in the tables of life that they found themselves at.

But their example need not be ours. God unites and affirms us at his table. His Real Presence will be real if we carry that affirmation into our homes and offices. We can begin within our own families.

We must remember - all three women were from middle to upper-middle class families. They were not ghetto children. But they were not REALLY affirmed and accepted according to God's example in their own families.

So in the name of God's mercy given at the banquet before us - tell your sons and daughters they are important to you; tell your mothers and fathers of their importance. Similarly, take time to share the same with your spouse.

For in so doing, you are responding to the mercy first given ^{and I} ~~us~~ by God. And in so responding, ~~we~~ will be able to rejoice. Yes, I say it again, rejoice. For your minds will be filled with things that are good and deserve praise, things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and honorable.

AMEN

PENTECOST XX

Luth Church of the Master, Troy

October 24, 1976

"STICK TO ONE MODEL"

...but in the beginning, at the creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and be made one with his wife; and the two shall become one flesh. It follows that they are no longer two individuals: they are one flesh. What God has joined together, man must not separate."

Mark 10:6-9

On his 50th Wedding Anniversary, Henry Ford was asked his formula for a successful married life. He replied that it was the same formula that made his automobile successful -- "Stick to one model."

Obviously, the car industry no longer agrees with that principle. But it's still the same formula for marriage -- at least from God's point of view. God's intention was that in marriage man was to "stick to one model."

In essence God is saying - give that model a good test drive before you make any deals -- any promises. Don't be overwhelmed by that models good looks or great strength and virility -- these won't be the lasting qualities of any model.

"Stick to one model" says Henry Ford and our Almighty Father -- that's what ought to be -- that's God's intention. But we know that's not always WHAT IS -- reality is often contrary to God's ideal.

And that's the story of man's struggle -- between what is and what ought to be. And no one is excused from that struggle. The Eden story is real for all of us -- inscribed upon every life. We deal with its consequences every day.

What we ought to be reflects God's intention. But what we are reflects man's fall from God's intention. The search for the better life is the

search for the paradise we have lost.

And so it is that Jesus was confronted about God's intention for man and woman. Here again some Pharisees wanted to trick Jesus -- they wanted him to state that the highest principle is the law (which allowed for divorce).

But Jesus did not take their bait. He said the highest principle is not Moses' law or any civil laws -- but rather God's intention through creation itself. And his intention was that man and woman should be one - and live in unity and harmony.

Please note -- this ideal is not God's law -- it is not a dictum of force from God or society. Rather this is God's blessing through creation. Unity in marriage is not an issue of law; it is an issue of creation, ordained by God by the very act of creation.

And so marriage is not only ^a ~~the~~ commitment ~~two~~ people make to each other -- but also a commitment to the loving Father who has joined them "together." Christian marriage is always a triangle with God at the top -- our married love is always rooted in God's purpose for us.

But we all know how we fall away from this. We all know how easy it is to be controlled by fault-finding, blaming, excuses, arrogance, lust, and all those powers of sin. In fact, as Christians we all know that not one of us is innocent of these.

I have been deeply amused by all the reaction to Jimmy Carter's statements in the Playboy article. There's no doubt that this candidate has jeopardized his campaign at times -- but his statement in Playboy is almost a paraphrase of the book of Genesis: "I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times."

Those statements reflect the condition of every man and woman -- they describe our condition after the fall. How amusing it is to watch all

the Prima Donas running around making fun of a statement which has great theological integrity.

The fact is that Jimmy Carter, Jerry Ford, Donald Riegle, Marvin Esch -- and all the rest of them, like us, have fallen short of God's intention for us. That is a basic fact of our human condition.

So we must ask -- what are we to do if that is how things really are? Many persons today enter marriage with the attitude, "If it doesn't work out, we can always call it quits."

That's not the model God ^{His model is not a quick attitude.} wants us to use for our relationships. He has blessed us with each other in creation -- and further, given us Jesus Christ as the model for our own relationships.

That means God has committed himself to us without reservation. He has not given us the leftovers of his love. He has in no way divorced himself from our lives. God has stuck to one model for us -- even with all our fault-finding, our excuses, our lusting and all the rest -- he has stuck to a model of forgiving mercy.

And that's what we are to offer one another whether our condition is marriage, divorce, or whatever the human relationship happens to be.

It should be clear that under God's model there is plenty of forgiving mercy for the one who has found it necessary to divorce. God has no rule of ex-communication for the divorcee. But at the same time, that does not make divorce God's desire and intention for man.

God has ordained marriage as reality for man and woman -- similarly -- God has ordained the marriage of Christ and his church. It may be lawful to live together outside of marriage -- it may also be lawful to be a Christian outside the church -- but these conditions are not the proper partnerships from God's point of view.

To really love and be faithful to another person is to be married. To really love and be faithful to God is to be a member of his **body** - the church.

In marriage, a partner does not merely talk about his love for his spouse. He shows it by supporting her sacrificially, and she him. They give to each other more than the leftovers of their lives.

The marriage of Christ and his body are the same. A church member does more than talk about his love for Christ. He shows his love by supporting Christ's body sacrificially -- by given of time and talent in specific merciful deeds. He gives Christ's body more than the leftovers of his life.

Yes - we thank God for his model to us -- and for those who have lived up to his model in our lives.

There is a time when a pastor must be personal -- he does this not to embarrass or to boast. But he becomes personal so that people see his personal weaknesses as well as strengths -- but also so that people might share that personal testimony with each other.

So it is that I thank God for a beautiful and loving person in my life. She would have to be special to put up with me, for I'm no prize. She has known my weaknesses -- she has known my lusts -- she has too often received the leftovers of my life. Yet I thank God in all these things and many more for his forgiving love through her.

And much like her, each of you has been the same for me and hopefully for each other. You have continued to forgive and love me, even when I have not been a prize pastor. You have done this because this is the nature of his body -- the nature of his model -- the nature of marriage, whether between two people, or between Christ and his people, the church.

God help us to continue to **STICK TO THIS ONE MODEL** -- in our personal marriages, and in our marriage to each other through this body. **AMEN.**

PENTECOST XX
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
October 17, 1982
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"THE ULTIMATE PARTNERSHIP"

"It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him. (Gen 2:18) ... What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder... for whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; ..." (Mark 10:9,11)

Several weeks ago one of our members was leaving worship and mentioned as she shook my hand: "I've really noticed that you've lost some weight! How are things going for you?? I responded: "Great! I haven't felt so good for the last eight years!" She was not totally satisfied. "Are you certain that you are feeling o.k.? You sure you're not suffering from anything?" Again, I responded: "Not to my knowledge -- although I haven't had a physical for a couple of years!" She then said: "Well, I was getting real concerned. I was almost certain with your weight loss that you and Sue were having marital problems!"

Again, I had to answer: "Well to the best of my knowledge we're not having marital problems -- but I do appreciate your concern."

Quite seriously - I did appreciate the supportive concern. But the comments also uplifted what seems to be an obsession of our thoughts and feelings these days -- we are more prone to think of negative than positive realities about one another. Especially are we trigger-happy to think in terms of "dissolution," "divorce," "separation," and "brokenness" regarding partnerships these days. Instead of being the exception, separation and brokenness have almost become "the new principle of our age."

Before going further - let me be quite clear from a pastoral perspective -- there are truly some partnerships which mandate separation and dissolution. As is clear from our text today -- divorce is wrong (not God's intention), but sometimes it is less wrong than a destructive and hellish marriage. I will comment further on this later.

The point to be made from today's texts, regardless of one's marital status, is that God has a principle for life that militates against brokenness and dissolution. That principle is plain but pervasive: from the beginning, all humanity, both male and female, was created to live a partnership of mutual support, mutual affirmation,... of mutual helpfulness.

That issue is satirically illustrated in one of the many favorite stories of Adam and Eve. Adam says to Eve regarding the long, wheat-like grass in their yard: "What's wrong with long grass blowing in the wind. I think it looks nice."

Eve responds: "It would look nicer if it were shorter."

But Adam retorts: "There's no way for it to grow short. If God had wanted it to grow short, he would have grown it short from the beginning."

Eve responds: "God didn't think that much about lawns in the beginning. I'd prefer it to be shorter."

Adam firmly says: "It's impossible, Eve. There's just no way! Why, I'd have to cut every single blade of grass to make it shorter."

And Eve says: "And what's wrong with that??"

Adam retorts: "Well, I'd have to invent a lawn mower."

As Eve takes a kettle out to make a vegetable dish, she says: "Well, Adam, you do what supper don't you."

Please be assured - my aim here is not to say that the woman's place is in the kitchen and the man's place is mowing the lawn. The point of the story is that from the beginning God has created us to be mutually supportive and affirming of one another. Regardless of who cooks or who mows, God's principle for humanity from the beginning is that we would be committed to mutual support and upbuilding of one another.

That's God's story from Genesis to Revelation. Everything that God has touched ... everything that he has fashioned ... everything that he has given HAS BEEN FOR THE MUTUAL UPBUILDING AND SUPPORT OF MANKIND! That's God's model for human partnerships --- that they might reflect his eternal partnership -- that they might always seek to support and uplift life.

That's God's will for his people and all people -- told and retold and retold again throughout scripture. First told about creation ... then told about marriage ... then told through the life of Jesus Christ ... then further told in the lives of the disciples and the Christian Church ... and then finally told THROUGH THE ULTIMATE PARTNERSHIP -- the resurrection to an eternal relationship with God.

Our tendency is to look at Jesus words in this text, words about adultery and divorce, and to see them as if they were harsh, legalistic, unmerciful principles. To the contrary - they are merely words which reflect God's ultimate principle for life -- the fidelity of commitment! God has made that commitment of fidelity to us -- through creation, through male and female, through Jesus Christ, through the church, through eternal life -- God delivers us his promise THAT HUMANITY WILL NEVER BE ALONE! God offers us an absolute partnership -- he promises that he will never renig, never withdraw his support, his love, his forgiveness from us. In Jesus Christ, God has made us forever ONE with him!

He sets the same standard for us in our relationship to one another. Marriage serves as the illustrative vehicle of this text. In short, Jesus is saying - you have been created in God's image -- for the purpose of faithful support ... for the purpose of fulfilling promises to one another ... for the purpose of mutual affirmation.

So Jesus goes on -- when you divorce one another, you break that partnership of fidelity -- you sever God's intended support system. Such broken promises ... such severance of fidelity and support is the meaning of adultery.

Contrary to many modern notions of adultery - "adultery" is not merely sexual promiscuity or changing bed partners. Adultery is the intentional dissolution of one's promise of faithfulness to another (which of course, often shows itself in sexual immorality).

And so we see here that Jesus' words were intended to reinforce the fidelity system of God -- not to make divorced people feel a heavier burden of guilt. Obviously, for any one who has violated a promise of fidelity -- these

words have a guilt-rendering affect. Jesus intent here was not to leave any of us in that state of guilt -- but merely to show that God's ultimate principle for all of us is TO LIVE FOR A COMMITMENT TO FIDELITY --

fidelity to creation ...

fidelity to one another, esp. in marriage,

fidelity to Jesus Christ ... and

fidelity to his mission through the church.

The bare facts are that all of us have committed adultery -- all of us have been unfaithful to God, to one another, to the beauty of creation. At one time or another -- we have all exploited our partnerships with creation, with each other, and with God. We have all lusted after selfishness -- some of us in marriage, some of us with our possessions, all of us in our relationship to Christ and his church! Contrary to God's model and principle of faithful giving to us -- we have so often turned around and only been concerned about getting, acquiring, possessing, and multiplying our own treasures!

And only God can cure us from this adultery -- from this unfaithfulness to his power and principle of love. Even in the face of our unfaithfulness -- even in the face of our brokenness of marriage -- even in the face of our lukewarm allegiance to Him and our token commitment to his mission through the church -- even as he daily sees our hardness of heart to his love -- HE STILL GRACES US WITH HIS ULTIMATE PARTNERSHIP -- he faithfully forgives all our adultery, all our selfishness, all our broken promises WITH THE HOPE THAT WE WILL BE BORN ANEW!!

Through his faithful forgiveness -- which is the ULTIMATE PARTNERSHIP -- he makes clear to us that his relationship to us IS MORE THAN A SHORT TERM CONTRACT -- it is an everlasting covenant!! Unlike a restrictive contract, God's covenant is expansive -- his love grows and goes on forever! When he sees us falling short of fidelity -- he reaches out more aggressively to support and affirm us IN ORDER THAT WE MIGHT BE BORN ANEW to a more faithful, forgiving, and supportive lifestyle... not only in marriage, but in all relationships of our lives.

That's the ever-expanding love of God. Day after day, month after month, year after year -- he sees our love for

Him and one another adulterated! But he doesn't give up on us! He forgives us all our adultery -- all our broken promises IN ORDER THAT WE MIGHT RENEW AND EXPAND OUR COMMITMENT TO HIM AND ONE ANOTHER!!

As you all know - you received a letter about the Pony Express this past week. Within hours of delivery of that letter -- Frances received a call saying NO WAY WAS THIS PERSON GOING TO DELIVER THAT SADDLEBAG TO ONE OTHER PERSON!! I'm glad Frances didn't tell me who the caller was.

God blesses us with abundance -- then he gives us the opportunity to be a faithful blessing to Him and to one another -- and so often we merely complain when he asks for a little fidelity from us -- when he asks for only the energy that it will take to go down the street to a neighbor. We've got energy for football games, and parites, and weekends at the cottages, and art exhibits, and social gatherings -- but we're reluctant to exert ourselves to merely give a saddlebag to a fellow member of our household of faith.

God help us to start living up to the faithful potential that he has blessed us with from the very beginning!! God help us to show our commitment of fidelity to Him and one another -- God help us to be the committed giving, forgiving, and faithful partners he has created us to be!

AMEN

PENTECOST XX
World Communion Sunday
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
October 5, 1986
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"LITTLE THINGS MEAN A LOT!"

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" Jesus replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you." Luke 17:5-6

LITTLE WORDS, like "follow me," "go into all the world," "forgive, as you have been forgiven," "repent and believe," "love one another," and "serve rather than be served." LITTLE DEEDS, like giving a cup of water, welcoming a stranger, visiting the sick, the lonely, the imprisoned, washing the disciples feet or wiping the lips of a dying patient, or crying with the bereaved. LITTLE THINGS like five loaves and two fishes, a widow's mite, a sparrow that falls, a small wafer and a sip of wine, or a tiny mustard seed.

Little words, little deeds, little things -- these were so often the focus of Jesus' ministry. Jesus did not concentrate on the big things and the big people -- he was far more interested in the little, the small, the seemingly inconsequential -- he was concerned about the least and the lost and the lonely -- he was moved to compassion for the little children of the world. Is it any wonder that Jesus compares FAITH AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD to one of the littlest things known to him -- a grain of mustard seed.

A mustard seed is so small - so small that it's almost invisible -- so tiny that it takes hundreds to make just one ounce -- so miniscule that you can have a mustard seed in your eye and not even know that it's there. But that little mustard seed was known to flourish and grow and multiply TO BECOME VAST AND GREAT BUSHES AND TREES. Something so miniscule BECAME SO MIGHTY! Something so little GREW TO BECOME SO GREAT!!

In today's world with our medical and microscopic sophistication - Jesus might have told this parable substituting the egg from an ovary or possibly the DNA molecule. The point is obvious -- that which is microscopic can become majestic ... magnificent ... and marvelously beautiful! Just look at yourselves in the mirror -- and you see how a mustard seed grows into a magnificent expression of God's grace!

It's obvious that Jesus was saying that something very little can become something very great! A little faith goes a long way! A little expression of love ...

a little support and sympathy ... a little time with someone who is lonely ... a little kindness and concern can overcome mountains of isolation ... a little word of forgiveness can totally heal a long-term separation and take all the guilt away. Yes, LITTLE THINGS CAN MEAN A LOT!

But the philosophy of faith according to Jesus Christ has not been easily marketed in this world. The world is not very interested in little words ... little things ... or the little deeds of faith. The mentality of today's marketplace leans toward BIGNESS! "To make it" in this 20th century world you've got to be big (so the saying goes). You've got to deal with the big issues, the big elections, the big numbers, the big cities, the big deals, the big debts, and of course, ALL THE BIG TROUBLES. To live in this world is to have faith only in those persons, places, and things THAT MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE.

But what has this mentality for bigness really done for us? Has bigness made the world more loving? No, it has made the life seem more cold and cruel? Has bigness made this world a more peaceful place? By no means -- bigness has produced hatred and constant threats of war. Has bigness made relationships more caring and compassionate? By no means -- bigness has meant that we often become computer statistics ... people who no longer have time for people BECAUSE WE'RE TOO BUSY WITH OUR MICROCHIPS AND MEGABUCKS!

Just look at what bigness has done to Toledo alone. Look at what's happened to our big companies -- O-I, LOF, Sheller Globe, Jeep, and most recently OCF. What has bigness done for these companies?? Oh, it has certainly made them more profitable -- and that is good! But has it made them more committed to their employees? Has it made them more willing to invest in this community? Has it made them more grateful for their pioneers as well as their future generations? Let's face it -- what bigness has done for these companies today IS MAKE THEM EASY TARGETS FOR TAKEOVERS! Bigness makes big people feel that they can shove other big people around -- and the real losers are the little people (which of course, is all of us!)

We have certainly seen that with big government. Has bigness in government meant that little people will be better served? Not the case at all. Big government has made bedfellows with those who have the biggest lobbying interests -- namely, the defense and tobacco industries. One author has said that government suffers today from the BIG BREAST SYNDROME -- both big people and little people thinking they can get a free-lunch forever.

But we dare not point the finger at government or

or industry. The real dangers of bigness are right here in the church. According to LCA standards, Hope Lutheran Church ranks as one of the biggest in the LCA. With over 1250 baptized members, we rank among the top 10% of Lutheran congregations in Ohio.

But as much as this is a great strength, it is also our greatest weakness! Because among the people of Hope - just like other big institutions - the mentality soon grows that "someone else can do it." Is it any wonder that big churches always have the same problems as big government -- people somehow think that being a part of a big church in a wealthy community AUTOMATICALLY ENDOWS THAT CHURCH WITH A RICH RESERVOIR OF GIVING! Nothing could be further from the truth! I know of many inner city churches that have a better record of giving per capita than this congregation. BIG PEOPLE IN BIG PLACES are sometimes the smallest when it comes to their own faithfulness and commitment!

The gospel today clearly proclaims that BIGNESS ALONE means nothing without a community of committed people to LITTLE ACTS OF FAITH! This could not be more graphically illustrated today than through the life of Annette Warnke. We certainly all know that Annette was no BIG PERSON! But all of her LITTLE WORDS AND DEEDS AND ACTS OF FAITH made her grow from the faith of a mustard seed to the faith of a monumental tree.

Here is the woman who weekly got on the phone and called the crucifers and acolytes ... making sure they would be here. Here is the woman that year after year after year touched the lives of hundreds of children in the Sunday School of Hope Church. Here is the woman who saw to it that her pastors got treated with all kinds of little goodies - even a periodic trip to the Toledo Club. Here is the woman who was never afraid to invite her family and friends to the multitude of events in the life of her church -- BECAUSE THIS HOME WAS ANNETTE'S SECOND HOME. Here was a woman whose little words and little deeds and little acts of FAITH TOUCHED AND INSPIRED THE LIVES OF SO MANY. It is no wonder that my five-yr old Sarah's reaction to Annette's death was to say: "Well, Dad, Jesus will really be happy to have Annette with him."

Yes - it's the little people like Annette Warnke - who offer the little words, the little deeds, the little acts of faith that grow and grow and grow into great influences of missionary zeal. They are what make the church and its ministry so magnificent and monumental!

That's why it's the little words like "I love you" or "I forgive you" or "I really care" that mean a lot. That's why it's the LITTLE DEEDS like a daily smile or an

afternoon hug that mean a lot. That's why it's the LITTLE THINGS like a \$5 blanket for Lutheran World Relief or a pint of blood for the Blood Bank THAT REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE. All these little words, little deeds, little things -- these are the things that mean a lot.

As I counsel with people and listen to their problems or joys -- I'm forever reminded that THEIR GREATEST JOYS AND GREATEST PROBLEMS are not the big things, but the little things. Many times we make little things into big things -- but basically their little things. Not enough time, not enough attention, not enough talk, not enough tenderness -- little things. How desparately we all need to focus much more upon THE MUSTARD SEEDS OF OUR LIVES -- the little words, the little deeds, the little things in our relationships and ministry.

It was a late afternoon on December 5, 1955 when a little maid finished her work in a large home in Montgomery, Alabama. She was tired and bushed. So when she entered the bus that afternoon, she didn't feel like walking all the way to the back. Her feet, her body, and her soul were just too tired to walk to the "colored section." So she sat down in the first seat available - in the front of the bus. It was such a little thing -- certainly she never intended to start a big national movement that day.

As a result she was jailed for one night -- for just sitting in the front of the bus. Her little act against injustice ... her little protest against racism ... her little deed that day revealed THE BIGGER WILL OF GOD AND BEGAN A BIG MOVEMENT THAT HAS CHANGED THE LIVING PATTERNS OF AMERICANS EVER SINCE. One little deed of faith has meant a lot more -- one little mustard seed on an Alabama bus has moved mountains and transplanted trees in the whole continent of America.

In recent weeks, I have spent time with several people suffering from sickness and despair of all kinds. In many of those situations, I could have spent hours upon hours of trying to use my pastoral and psychological background to make a big difference. Sometimes we actually think we can change lives by our own greatness! But in most of those situations, there was something far greater yet much smaller than all my talk -- it was the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In all those situations, I finally had to offer that which is most needed by the whole world: THE FORGIVING, MERCIFUL LOVE OF GOD! That's the power that finally made the difference. That's what allowed some of those people to finally be healed ... or to accept death ... or to feel loved and forgiven. Not my words, but the mustard seed of God ... THE ULTIMATE WORD OF LIFE ... THE

THE FORGIVING, SACRAMENTAL WORD OF JESUS CHRIST.

St. Paul offered that mustard seed in a half a dozen places in the near east nearly 2000 years ago. And that mustard seed has grown and spread throughout the entire habited world. That's all it takes ... is one little person who is grateful for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Likewise, it was that same one person who hung on a tree in Golgatha -- but that one person's life has changed the whole world.

And we are here today as benefactors of that one person's little words and little deeds. As we believe and share the little words and little deeds of Jesus Christ, we will continue to transform this world into God's kingdom -- a kingdom where little words, little deeds, and little acts of love not only mean a lot, BUT MAKE THE WHOLE WORLD AN ENVIRONMENT OF PEACE AND HARMONY ... A WORLD TRULY IN TOTAL COMMUNION WITH GOD!

AMEN.

PENTECOST XX (World Communion Sunday)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
October 1, 1989
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"VITAL CONNECTIONS"

Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord ... but share in suffering for the gospel in the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works, but in virtue of his own purpose and grace which he gave us in Jesus Christ ages ago ... for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control. 2 Timothy 1:7-9

What are your most VITAL CONNECTIONS in life? By "vital connections," I mean those forces or persons WHO HOLD YOU UP when you feel you're FALLING DOWN ... WHO GIVE YOU HOPE, when you're tempted toward despair and defeat ... WHO LOVE AND FORGIVE YOU even when you fail and flounder ... WHO COME TO YOUR AID regardless of time, effort or expense.

For those of you who were here last Sunday - you certainly know that THE VITAL CONNECTIONS of life have nothing to do with vacuum cleaners or vacuum cleaner salesmen. I'm glad that Pastor Michaels realized that vacuum cleaner sales were not God's VITAL CONNECTION for HIS life. They do pick up dirt, but they don't PICK up people who are fearing death, feeling depressed, or floundering in failure. In my 47 years, there has only been ONE VITAL CONNECTION that has ever done that for me -- THE LOVE OF GOD THROUGH FAITHFUL PEOPLE!

You know the people whom I'm referring to -- people like Abraham and Sarah. ABE & SARAH who were very settled in their own land, but picked up their belongings and moved to a new land because God called them to give other people a more secure PLACE. People like Moses -- whose work became a major turning point for God's suffering children in EGYPTIAN SLAVERY AND BONDAGE. People like Elijah - who in spite of his fear and trembling - spoke eloquently and acted FOR THOSE WANDERING IN THE WILDERNESS. People like Martin Luther - who in the face of intimidating ecclesiastical power -- stood firm in the grace and mercy of a forgiving God. People like Jesus Christ, who was OBEDIENT unto his Father's will so that we can claim victory by his righteousness RATHER THAN suffer defeat by our own disobedience.

Yes -- THE REAL VITAL CONNECTIONS for me has always been GOD'S PEOPLE -- persons like Blanche & Rose, Ida & James, Howard & Ted, Chuck & Mert, and a multitude like them. People like the member of Hope, who has for several weeks, visited another seriously ill member of Hope EVERY SINGLE DAY -- just to reassure that sick member of her VITAL CONNECTION TO GOD'S LOVE & GRACE. Yes, the VITAL CONNECTIONS are those faithful people who have not been ashamed TO SHOW THEIR FAITH IN GOD'S LOVE AND COMPASSION FOR OTHERS.

So it is that we see this same spirit in today's text from Timothy. Timothy was just beginning his ministry as a pastor. He was living in an age of persecution and plunder against the faithful. His greatest mentor, St. Paul, had been imprisoned and denied future ministry with him. Timothy was now faced with the challenge of "going it all alone." Like any normal rookie - he was fearful and feeling inadequate. Those are the moments we need the reassuring guidance from our VITAL CONNECTIONS -- we need to be coached by a trusted and confident friend who has already done faithful duty ... WE NEED TO KNOW THAT WE ARE VITALLY CONNECTED.

Today - on this World Communion Sunday - Christians pause to give thanks FOR THAT MULTITUDE OF VITAL CONNECTIONS who have not just said, "I believe" - but who have SHOWN THE GIFTS OF BELIEVING ... THE OFFERINGS OF FAITH ... THE COURAGE AND COMMITMENT OF CREEDS. And what is the greatest gift that they have offered us ... THE MOST VITAL CONNECTION that they have demonstrated: THAT NO MAN CAN LIVE AT PEACE WITH GOD OR OTHERS WITHOUT THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST. And that VITAL CONNECTION has been revealed to you and me through GOD'S WORD AND SACRAMENTS.

The treasure of Word and Sacraments are still ours today because of faithful fathers and mothers - like Lois and Eunice - who remained connected to the gospel in all times of trouble and turmoil. Again I ask you - who do you turn to in times of trouble or turmoil? Is it your vacuum cleaner salesman? Is it a gossipy friend who betrays your confidence? Is it your boss who may use your weakness against you? Is it your network of social friends, who will be tempted to spill your troubles at the next cocktail party? If you're like me -- and like Timothy -- you will turn to someone who will offer you the gospel ... because that's the only person and power that is committed to GETTING YOU BACK UP WHEN YOU'VE ALREADY BEEN STRUCK DOWN.

That's been the story of the gospel throughout all history. All kinds of principalities and powers have attempted to do away with the gospel -- but in 1989 it stands just as strong as it did when Paul was offering it to Timothy. In 303 A.D., the Roman emperor, Diocletian, instigated the most horrendous onslaught against the Word of God that the world has ever known. He ordered the total and complete annihilation of every manuscript or biblical fragment that could be found. Thousands upon thousands of person who possessed copies -- and their families -- were martyred. After two years of ruthless slaughter and destruction - Diocletian erected a victory column over the charred embers of a Bible inscribed: "Extinct forever the name of Christianity!"

Less than ten years later, the emperor Constantine had the Bible enthroned as the infallible truth of God. His goal was to put copies of the N.T. in every church in the empire. So he offered a reward for anyone who could discover and deliver the holy book to his officers. Within four hours - 50 copies were brought out of hiding and given to the emperor.

Faithful Christians have always done more than merely talk about the gospel -- THEY HAVE ALWAYS DELIVERED THE GOOD NEWS! Under the threat of persecution and personal death, the faithful are "not ashamed of testifying to the Lord ... and of suffering for the gospel ... not in virtue of their own good works, but in virture of God's own purpose and his grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus."

But the challenge to God's VITAL CONNECTIONS of love has not only come from political powers. Throughout history, a formidable foe to the faithful has been philosophical intellectualism. In the 18th century, the french philosopher, Voltaire, predicted that 100 years from his lifetime the good news of the gospel would be forever forgotten. He said it as follows: "100 years from my day there will not be a Bible in the earth except one that is looked upon by antiquarian curiosity seekers." Before that century ended - his home was owned by the Geneva Bible Society, from which millions of Bibles have been distributed world-wide. And 100 years from his prediction - a first edition of his work sold for \$.11 in a Paris market -- when at that same time the British government paid the Soviet Union \$500,000 for the rare Codex Sinaiticus - one of the earliest manuscripts of the Bible.

Thanks be to God for the "faith of our fathers" and mothers "who in spite of dungeon, fire or sword ... remained true to death to the VITAL CONNECTION OF THE GOSPEL. Nothing in all creation has been able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But let us not be so foolish to think that trouble and turmoil for the gospel is only something of a bygone era. The cosmic enemies of the gospel are much more subtle today than in Paul's day. Few of us will be imprisoned or martyred for our VITAL CONNECTION TO THE GOSPEL. Today, we are more likely to be overlooked, avoided, or ridiculed for any show of faith in Jesus Christ. On this World Communion Sunday - whatever critics are paying any attention to us are probably claiming that the Sacrament of Holy Communion is OUR SIGN OF weakness rather than GOD'S SIGN OF strength. They will be watching millions of US parade to altars like this one. People will TAKE, people will EAT, people will DRINK, and many people will walk away from the Lord's Table no different than when they came.

Dear friends in Christ - if this sacrament is truly the ULTIMATE OFFERING ... THE VITAL CONNECTION of our lives to Christ's life -- and we walk away from here unchanged ... then our critics have won the victory. The Christian church deserves to die if it cannot be brought to new life through the body and blood of its Savior.

I sincerely hope that this Sacrament is much more of a VITAL CONNECTION for you than a mere memorial of Christ's death. I sincerely hope that when you eat this bread ... and drink this cup ... THE VERY LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST IS REKINDLED

WITHIN YOU. I sincerely hope that you are not ashamed to testify to anyone that you have been fed the very bread of life ... that you have been empowered with Christ's spirit of love and self-control ... that you are no longer weak and guilty, but now strong and confident to forgive others as you have been forgiven.

Today, 16 young children make their first journey to the Table of the Lord. This will be the first of a multitude of trips to an altar like this one. Today these children may feel like Timothy -- uncertain, doubtful, not totally yet convinced. BUT OVER THE YEARS, THIS VITAL CONNECTION WITH CHRIST will give them new courage and new confidence to be like their Lord.

Yes, with the passage of time, they will not come to this altar uncertain or doubtful. They will come the same way that you and I come: "not only to be told that God loves us ... BUT TO BE SHOWN GOD'S LOVE AS A VITAL CONNECTION ... a tangible/palatable power to be kindled within us. Because we believe when we eat this bread and drink this wine -- we leave here very differently than we came. WE ARE FREED FROM WHATEVER BONDAGE IS HOLDING US DOWN ... FREE TO BE LIKE GOD AGAIN ... FREE TO BE A VITAL CONNECTION OF PEACE AND HOPE FOR THE WORLD.

When we leave Christ's tangible table ... when we have tasted the brokenness of his body ... when we depart with his presence in our very beings -- then we not only say, "I believe," then we SHOW THE WORLD WHAT IT MEANS TO BELIEVE.

WE SHOW THE WORLD that Sunday morning is the greatest moment of good news ever GIVEN TO THE WORLD -- esp. after THE DRUNKENESS AND TRAGEDY OF many Saturday nights.

WE SHOW THE WORLD that when God calls us to give him praise and glory -- we will not even allow weekend guests to keep us away. NOTHING WILL SEPARATE US FROM HIS LOVE.

WE SHOW THE WORLD that when our chief shepherd tells us of a Hurricane disaster causing great disconnection -- we will not merely shake our heads but rather dip into our pockets to offer relief for those who are suffering such persecution.

WE SHOW THE WORLD that believing means spending our lives and our money to OFFER A VITAL CONNECTION OF GOD'S LOVE to the hungry and homeless and helpless of the world.

WE SHOW THAT BELIEVING means going daily to the neighbor down the street whose wife is suffering from terminal cancer.

In short, WE SHOW A VITAL CONNECTION to gospel of Jesus Christ ... and to the communion of saints who live by that gospel. So, do not be ashamed of testifying to that Lord, but share in his suffering for the gospel of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our good works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Jesus Christ. Rekindle that gift within you ... it is God's most vital connection of love and self-control.

AMEN.

PENTECOST XX (World Communion Sunday)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
October 6, 1991
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"C R E A T E D F O R C O M M U N I T Y"

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." ... "So we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one." Genesis 2:18 Hebrews 2:9-10

Tommy was out of breath. He had been running and arrived just int time for his Little League practice. Tommy always seemed to be rushing in order to be on time for practices and games. Today, however, he was ready to play -- he had his shoes, he had his cap, he had his full uniform. His coach, however, noticed one major item was missing: "Tommy," he asked, "where is your glove?" Tommy quickly responded, "I don't have my glove, Coach, 'Cause I'm separated." Tommy's buddy, Jimmy, wanted to know how Tommy "could be separated" since he wasn't even married.

Needless to say, Tommy's mother and father were separated - in the process of getting a divorce. One day, Tommy was at his mother's house; the next day, at his father's house. On one occasion, Tommy didn't have his baseball shoes because they were at his mother's house and he was at his father's house that day. This day it happened to be his glove which was at his father's house because he had been at his mother's house. Does it sound a little chaotic? Well, that's why Tommy didn't have his glove - "because he was separated."

And the Lord God said, "It is not good that anyone should be separated and alone; I will make a helper fit for him." We all know the "Tommies" of this world; some of them are sitting here with us this morning. They are often caught in the middle of family brokenness ... sometimes feeling very much alone ... many times feeling very separated. We all know that God didn't intend it to be that way ... we all know that the parents of the Tommies never intended it to be that way. But for one out of two families married in the last fifteen years - Tommy may not get there with his baseball glove, or his textbook, or his assignment ... because it's at "the other home" - "I don't have it, because I'm separated." Instead of being "Created for Community" - the situation for many Tommies is often one of "separation, aloneness, pain, guilt, embarrassment, sometimes even chaos and criminality."

But let us not fall into the temptation -- as some church bodies have today -- of making marriage the only illustration of brokenness from God's intention. Obviously, we cannot skirt the fact that God intended the bond between husband and wife to be a classic reflection of his intent for creation -- in marriage, we see the basic bond for human community. As

that bond has become weaker and weaker in our culture, the very reality of "bonding" (of human community) has been weakened in our society. So the Tommies of our times keep on searching and searching for any supportive community that will offer them security and trust. There has never been a greater challenge for the church. Like never before, God is calling the church to become THAT COMMUNITY OF SECURITY AND TRUST for the Tommies of this world.

But divorce and separation are not the only forces of brokenness in this world. Some years ago, I quoted former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's immortal words when nuclear warheads arrived in Great Britain. She said: "We can now maintain a balance of terror." Those words reflect the deeper disease infecting this whole world: EVERYONE IS BASICALLY WANTING TO MAINTAIN A BALANCE OF TERROR -- TO GET EVERYTHING TO GO HIS WAY OR HER WAY. The Bible has always called that condition: SIN. In terms of everyday living - it is the way of pro-brokenness -- pro-war, pro-destruction, pro-self-survival, pro-save-my-own-skin, pro-slander, pro-kill rather than be-killed. In short, it is diametrically opposed to God's pro-creation intention. Because the results of sin always leave us alone -- basking in our own separation, slander and selfishness. As you can see -- divorce is but one symptom of this disease called sin. There are hundreds of other symptoms -- from bigotry to racism to ethnicism to denominationalism to anti-Semitism to parochialism to terrorism to hedonism to materialism ... and the list goes on and on and on!

In short, we are all suffering from this sickness of separation and alienation. It is a community disease of the human family. And yet, none of us want it this way, and we all know that God doesn't want it this way. So - we come up with all kinds of legal stipulations and rules to resolve the dilemma. Like Moses and some Christian traditions, we think we can resolve this sickness through spiritual sophistry ... by committing ourselves to a multitude of moral mandates.

That remedy always reminds me of the story of Jack, who promised that if he lived after a tragic car accident, he would become morally committed to the priesthood for the rest of his life. True to his word, as soon as he was released from the hospital, he entered a monastery. But in all of his spiritual ecstasy - he forgot to check out the moral mandates of this monastery. Monks in this place took a vow of silence -- they were only allowed to speak two words every ten years. After ten years had passed, Jack went into the Abbot's office to say his two words. He simply said: "BED HARD." That was it for another ten years. At the end of his second ten years, he again entered the Abbot's quarters and delivered his second two-word pronouncement of faith: "FOOD BAD!" Again he was silent for 10 more years. Finally, after 30 years Jack entered the Abbot's inner sanctum and spoke these final two words: "I QUIT!" The Abbot responded: "Well, I'm not surprised. You haven't done anything but complain since you got here in the first place!"

Moral mandates and religious enthusiasm will not cure us from our basic human brokenness. In fact, sometimes religious institutions themselves are most guilty of NOT being a reflection of the "COMMUNITY" God intended them to be. This past week, I received a lengthy discourse from a member who has had a year filled with grief, hurt, vicious attacks, and painful isolation. Being new to the life of the church, he didn't know how to reach out for help in this community. He saw the pastors and many people always "being too busy for him" - it was nigh impossible to really get anyone's attention. And the Lord God said, "It is not good that anyone should be alone, I will make a helper fit for him."

The church was CREATED TO BE A COMMUNITY of Christ's light and hope for every person struggling in the darkness of isolation, fear, grief and aloneness. But tragically - both pastors and people in churches suffer from the same sickness that fosters separation and hurtfulness. We sometimes overlook the pain of divorce; we many times promote war instead of peace; we often preach against bigotry and then practice racism in the places that we choose to live and be educated; we routinely pass-by those suffering in poverty and then thank God that we are so much better off; we talk polite on Sunday and then profane and slander even friends on Monday thru Saturday. Yes my friends in Christ, we may not be divorced or separated -- but we all suffer from the same sickness that devastates God's CREATION FOR COMMUNITY! Let it never be said that there is only chaos in Tommy's family; that same chaos reigns supreme in every household of faith -- regardless of denominational, economic or political label.

And what is the cure for any family when chaos reigns supreme in a family household?? As one author has said, in families where estrangement and alienation exist - there is often only thing that can potentially bring the family back together again! Tragically but truly, only the death of a loved one from the family can sometimes RE-CREATE THE COMMUNITY God intended for such a family in the first place.

And that is why this Christian family and millions of others like it are gathered together today: IT IS THE DEATH OF THE MOST BELOVED PERSON IN OUR CHRISTIAN FAMILY THAT HAS BROUGHT US TOGETHER TODAY. It is the death of HIM FOR WHOM we have all received our family name. It is the death (and resurrection) of Jesus Christ for which we are here gathered.

There are no moral mandates that will make us one. All our confessions of repentance and acts of contrition will be helpful, but they will not cure our disease or CREATE RENEWED COMMUNITY. Only as we realize that Christ tasted death for each of us DO WE REALLY KNOW THAT WE HAVE BEEN GRACED ... WE HAVE BEEN GLORIFIED, RENEWED, REBORN TO BE LIKE HIM. Loving community is not a gift that can be earned by sinful and selfish people, it is only a gift that can be received by the one who gave without thinking first of himself. He GAVE IN ORDER THAT EVERYONE MIGHT GIVE & FORGIVE LIKE HIM ... AND NEVER BE ALONE AGAIN!

Today, eighteen young children come to the Lord's Table for the first time. In a broken world, this is the one place that they can trust that GOD ALWAYS CREATES COMMUNITY -- this is the ONE PLACE that brings us back together again ... as families, as churches, as communities and as nations. AT the Lord's Supper, God forgives and forgets our brokenness and separation ... in order that we might never be alone again. And then he says: "Tommy (or rather) Ben, Brian, Joanna, Sean, Kelly, Benjamin, Tim, Sarah, Sara, Trevor, Pat, Adam, Amanda, and Ben ... it is not good that you should ever be alone AGAIN - BECOME HELPERS FIT FOR ONE ANOTHER, BY LOVING AND FORGIVING ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE FIRST LOVED YOU.

AMEN.

Pentecost XX
October 13, 1996

Glenwood Lutheran, Toledo
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“HAVE NO FEAR!?”

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say Rejoice! ... Do not worry (or fear) about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication and thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Phil, 4:4-7

Ten years ago, *Psychology Today* conducted a survey on FEAR. I've enclosed in the bulletin a copy of the exact questionnaire used in the survey. More than 1000 subscribers responded and the results were printed three months later. As you may have guessed, the #1 fear was “the death of a loved one.” “Fear of serious illness” took second place; financial worries & nuclear war tied for third. Then came being the victim of crime. There was a large gap between these five & the others.

The only surprising finding was that respondents were more afraid of “spiders and snakes” than they were of losing their jobs! One person wrote: “Terrorists could torture me forever, but once they released a snake in the room I'd tell anything.” Natural disaster, the dark, flying and going to the dentist all got minimal response ... but women were less afraid of the dentist than men. Some of the other fears included loneliness, heights, public speaking, being found out by a spouse, and fire. Two people even said their greatest fear was “running out of toilet paper.” (anyone who knows me, knows this is my fear!!) Only a very few claimed to have no fears!!

One thing is certain from this survey: those who said they “had no fears” were not telling the truth. HAVE NO FEAR!! So easy to say, but so difficult to do!! We all have fears! We all have insecurities ... worries ... anxieties ... phobias!! So let's establish one truth today: WE ARE ALL FEARFUL! In fact an update article in *USA Today* magazine confirms that our fears of crime & health issues today have tremendously increased! esp by media: AIDS, drive-by-shootings, carjackings, Alzheimers, cancers- etc.

But how do we reconcile Paul's admonition & our fears: “Do not fear anything, but in everything by prayer & supplication let your requests be made known to God!” HAVE NO FEAR! Have No Fear if you just discovered you had cancer?! Have No Fear if all your friends just abandoned you; just lift up a prayer and God will give you new ones!! Have No Fear when your spouse tells you “I'm divorcing you!” Have No Fear about your future pastor or the future of this congregation!! Just tell God you want the best and it will be done for you?! Have No Fear when people continue to act as if you're a little crazy or always forgetful?! How can we be faithful to God and also remain honest with ourselves?? Well first: faithfulness means there's a difference between “having fears” and being “over come by fear!”

Let's be honest with God: God is not at all unrealistic about human fear. Earlier in today's gospel, Jesus warns his disciples : I send you out as

sheep in the midst of wolves; beware of others - they will deliver and flog you; Have any of you ever been hated or deceived by others?? Have you ever experienced persecution ... and had to think about moving on to a new place! Jesus promises we will be "hated for his sake," he also tells us to "shake off the dust & move on!" That's easier said than done! It's pretty obvious; the Bible understands fear!

But God also seeks to give us **very practical advice** about fear and overcoming fear! As Jesus said earlier in Matthew, the first step to overcoming fear IS TO ADMIT THAT THERE'S REASON FOR FEAR! **To overcome the obstacles of fear, one must first admit that there are obstacles to be feared!** Jesus was clearly telling us as disciples that there are many obstacles to fear in this world. He was saying: ***"Don't think you've got it made in this world without any fear; admit to yourself & others that you a vulnerable creature: YOU TOO ARE AFRAID of many things in Life!"***

But Jesus doesn't leave us "JUST ADMITTING FEAR:" **Second**, he is says, ***"Don't allow these obstacles of fear to become immobilizing forces."*** In other words, see these obstacles for what they really are -- simply human fears, common to everyday life, but not worthy of making them "end of the world fears!"

I remember vividly my **preparation to become a high school speech teacher**. Those first several college courses in public speaking SCARED ME STIFF. I always thought that was so strange; preparing to teach speech and yet being scared stiff to speak! **But how did I overcome that fear? Certainly not by avoiding it or running away from it!!** I did not allow the fear to IMMOBILIZE ME! I kept getting up and speaking and speaking and speaking ... and doing drama ... and confronting that fear with audiences. And with time, most of the obstacles faded away. As the old saying goes, **practice overcame paranoia!** **That reality is true for all ventures of life -** - whether God calls to **reach out to this community**, or take a **new job**, or to **overcome an accident**, or to **leave someone or something of the past behind behind us!!** Fears are natural, but they must be addressed & confronted with practices which will help overcome them.

You see, Jesus knows us ... he knows we can become immobilized by fear: So he asks: ***WHAT IS THE GREATEST GIFT ENTRUSTED TO YOU? YOUR BODIES...OR THE GLORY OF GOD?*** And what is the Glory of God: **"whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pleasing, whatever is pure, whatever is commendable, ... think about these things ... and the God of peace will be with you!"** To lose your life is one thing, but to lose these qualities of God's glory ... that IS TO LOSE EVERYTHING ... and that is the reality of hell!!

So, what does Jesus' second action step say about fear? It says: **CONFRONT IT! CHALLENGE IT! ADDRESS IT! BUT DON'T RUN AWAY FROM IT.** So let's go back to the first and greatest fear of the *Psychology Today* survey: the death of a loved one! But let's change that loss to the loss of YOUR FAVORITE PASTOR!. And you've all had one at GW! We have learned some important ways to deal with that fear. First, we must admit that we fear that loss. But second, we can't let that loss immobilize us: we cannot allow the loss of ANY OTHER leader make us feel there is no reason to go on. I have done that too often myself; I lose a significant relationship, and I act as if life is all over! Jesus has given us another way as he did with his friends! "Talk about the loss ... Address the hurt ... Admit the pain - and then apply God's Word to it!" In other words, God will always raise up a new leader for us with His new vision TO MOVE ON!

Jesus has already forgiven our fears of this pain & failure of the past; they are but a MOMENT in God's time!. Now he wants us to be faithful to the future, not by retreating from fear, but by facing it head-on ... even sometimes (as in the heat of battle) being willing to sacrifice our own bodies in order to overcome the fear of the situation. That's why the king sent his servants into the neighborhood to seek the faithful; because he had received no RSVP from the righteous ones. And the king is asking us to do the same here at Glenwood today -- go into the neighborhood and seek out those who will be faithful! God knows that the truly faithful will come out in droves!!

Hopefully, none of us in this room will ever have to sacrifice our own lives in order to do that ... as Jesus did ... or as Martin Luther King did ... or as many heroes of war and great martyrs have done. But these martyrs have taught us "that faithfulness is confronting fear head on & not allowing it to rule supreme!!" The price of faithfulness is not to run away from terrible things, but to confront the terrible: to turn the terrible into the tremendous love of God!! Sometimes, as we know from Jesus & other martyrs, that means we must bear the terror in our own bodies?? Is it any wonder that Jesus was called the suffering servant ... and that we have been called to be the same??

But let's even get more honest!! No human being other than Jesus ever totally took on the terror of the world with his own body! Unlike Jesus, we all suffer from the ultimate fear: **Death Itself!** (And anyone who says he/she doesn't is a liar and blaspheming God ... because only Jesus could overcome this fear!) So what is our ultimate weapon against this fear?? Quite simply, we must surrender our lives into the everlasting hands of God! We must call upon the Holy Spirit -- His power here & now -- and appeal for that Spirit to see us through our fear!!

I'd like to illustrate that appeal to His Spirit thru a graphic Civil War story. Abraham Lincoln frequently visited wounded soldiers in the mash areas. On one occasion, he encountered a young lad close to death, and asked the boy: "Is there anything I can do for you??" "Please write a letter to

my mother," the dying boy asked. The dying soldier failed to recognize his visitor as the Chief Executive, but just went ahead with his letter: "Dearest mother: I was badly hurt today while doing my duty, and I probably won't live. Don't sorrow too much for me ... I have given my best. May God bless you and father. Kiss Mary and John for me. All my love forever, Your Son, Joshua." The president finished signing the letter, then added this postscript: "Written for your son by Abraham Lincoln."

The boy asked to read the note one final time and was astonished to discover who had written it. "Are you really the President?" the boy asked. "Yes," said Lincoln, "now is there anything else I can do for you?" The dying boy lifted his head and said, "Will you please hold my hands, I think it will see me through to the end!" President Lincoln took the boy's hands--but it was God's Spirit in Lincoln's hands & words of encouragement that let that soldier's spirit slip into the glory of God's kingdom. My dear friends, ultimately that's the greatest gift that we can offer to anyone suffering fear: "the words and the hands of Jesus Christ held out right now through the Spirit" just as Lincoln did years ago!

I'm reminded of a little girl in SCS whose teacher shared Jesus' invitation: "Come unto me and I will give you my yoke." The teacher asked, "What is a Yoke?" One boy answered: "It's something they put on cow's necks to make their work easier." So, the teacher asked, "What is the yoke of Jesus?" The little girl answered, "The yoke of Jesus is when God puts his arms around us and keeps hugging us without ever stopping!" Now that's the Spirit of God's hands!! My Christian friends ... always know the difference between the Hands of the Spirit & merely Human Hands; if they are of God's Spirit, they never stop hugging!! We've all known those hands that have hugged us, and then stopped when a different model came along! That's the power of the devil!! And we wonder why we FEAR!! Yes, esp. in these political days, we all know about Official Hand Holders & Huggers: the ones who get paid to do it in order to get elected!!

"HAVE NO FEAR!?" Oh, there's a lot to fear, but every fear will be overcome in the grip of God's loving hands! Because God's Spirit holds us at this very moment: that's what the church is--being in the presence of the good hands people of God!! Has he not told us again and again ... that his kingdom is at hand ... we need only reach out and take his hands unto ourselves ... and hold on tight! There is no earthly fear that overcomes the grip of God!! For what is the greatest of all fears on earth? The "fear" (respect) of the Lord ... he is the most awesome lover and giver of security that the world has ever known. And that's why He says; "Go into the neighborhood and Invite all into my place, for there is nothing in all creation that should separate anyone from my love!" So, "fear the Lord your God" and you will have NOTHING TO FEAR in this world!!

AMEN.

Pentecost XX

Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo

October 5, 1997 (World Communion Sunday)

Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“MANY PROBLEMS, BUT ONE PURPOSE!”

The Lord God said, “It is not good that anyone should be separated and alone; I will make him a helper as a partner.” Gen. 2:1 Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.” Mark 10:9

Tommy was out of breath. He had been running to make it on time for Little League practice. Tommy was always rushing to get to practices and games. Today, however, he was ready to play -- he had his shoes, his cap, and his full uniform. Then the coach said, “Tommy, where is your glove?” Tommy quickly responded, “Sorry, Coach, I don’t have my glove ‘cause I’m separated.” Tommy’s buddies were really confused by this because they knew that Tommy wasn’t married.

But Tommy’s mother & father were separated. One day, Tommy was at mom’s house; the next day he was at dad’s house. On some occasions, Tommy didn’t have his baseball shoes ‘cause they were at mom’s house; on other occasions, Tommy didn’t have his uniform ‘cause it was at dad’s house. This day it was the glove: he had been at mom’s house & the glove was still at dad’s house. Does it sound a little chaotic??? Well, that’s how it feels to Tommy “to be separated.”

And the Lord God said, “It is not good that anyone should be separated & alone.” We all know the Tommies of this world; some are probably sitting with us here this morning. They are the ones often caught in the middle of brokenness and separation. We all know that God didn’t intend it that way ... and we know that Tommy’s parents didn’t intend it that way. But that’s the way it has become for four out of every ten kids ... and it’s tragic: “I don’t have what I’m supposed to have because I’m separated.”

There are times we think that Tommy’s story has only been told in recent decades -- possibly since 1960, from which time our divorce rate has doubled. But it is clear from the gospel today that this was never a new problem. Jesus was confronted in his ministry with the problem of divorce, just like you and I are today. Divorce and poor attitudes toward children were very common in his day -- in fact, probably worse than in our day. From the time of Moses people have had trouble staying married. In fact, ‘the writ of divorce’ in Moses’ day became an easy way for a man to rid himself of a wife.

According to the stricter and more conservative Jewish school of Shammai -- the only objectionable behavior that could justify a husband divorcing his wife was adulterous, sexual behavior. But the more liberal Jewish Hillel school allowed a husband to divorce his wife on the mere grounds of annoyance or embarrassment.

about the husband or the wife or the children ... they simply were testing Jesus to see which school of thought he would agree with.

Unlike many leaders and religions today - Jesus was not going to play the "Divorce Game" - to become the target of any debate, or any school or any denominational stance on divorce. Just like bigotry, racism and hedonism -- divorce is a condition of brokenness ... it is wrong. It is a calamity. But God is bigger than any human calamity. So instead of being lowered to the level of a debate on divorce, Jesus raised the level of discussion to God's intended purpose for human creation: namely, THAT NO ONE SHOULD BE ALONE--THAT THE FAMILY WAS INTENDED BY GOD TO BE A PERMANENT & SECURE PLACE FOR CHILDREN AND SPOUSES.

And that's what needs so much more attention and reflection in our world today -- not the problems of divorces, but God's singlemost purpose for marriage -- to provide a secure and permanent place for ourselves and our children. One author has said that for years social scientists and marriage counselors focused primarily on "Why Marriages Fail?" So they spent their time and energy studying divorced couples. Researchers today are beginning to ask a better and more Godly question: "Why Does A Marriage Work or Succeed?" And they're finding that couples with "working marriages" are far more committed to asking what God wants for them rather than what they want for themselves. And what God wants ... his purpose in simple terms: "a home is to be a place of permanency and security for spouses & children."

The facts are -- we have all fallen short of that ideal purpose of God ... whether we're divorced or not. I have been adulterous in my relationships and so has every other person in this room whether married or not. Granted -- most of us have not been sexually unfaithful. *But adulterous means that we have broken promises -- not only sexual promises, but promises to care, to share, to be there whenever needed, to talk when talk was needed, etc.* Not one of us in this room has been true to all these promises! And that's what true fidelity is all about -- KEEPING OUR PROMISES.

So, how can we re-establish our promise to keep things secure and permanent in our marriages, in our homes, in our churches and communities?? There is only one way that such security and trust can happen. We must do what Christ first did for us: DIE TO SELF! We must hunger for reconciliation and not merely hunger for revenge. We must better learn the words of patience & kindness not merely the words of irritability and retaliation. Because the facts are very clear -- only 17% of divorces in this country are attributable to sexual adultery. But 60% of divorces in this country are the direct result of poor communication --

Dear friends - we have to learn anew to say, "I'm sorry -- I shouldn't have done that or said that!" Like our Lord, we need a new emphasis upon dying to self and rising to forgiving grace in our relationships -- whether in our marriages, in our homes, in our schools or in our churches. That's not only God's purpose behind creating man and woman -- it's also his purpose behind instituting the Sacrament of Holy Communion. This sacrament was given to us to remind us "that only by dying on the cross for our sinfulness could we begin to live anew for his forgiving righteousness in this world." There was no hope for the world until Christ glorified life with "grace from the cross."

And the cross has taught us one thing we dare never forget: no Christian can blame his sinfulness onto others; when we do wrong we can't blame the devil. The cross reminded us that there is a time when every Christian must "fess up" that he/she is a part of the problem of brokenness in this world -- that we have said things and done things that are contrary to God's purpose. And with that confession made -- then it's time to live anew for God's purpose for us from the beginning: **TO PROVIDE A SECURE & PERMANENT PLACE OF LOVE FOR ALL CHILDREN OF THE WORLD.**

So it is that God says through Jesus Christ -- "Take and eat; this is my body; this is my blood." I have surrendered my life so that you might come to know that only in surrendering & giving up the old life can there be any new life!! That's the promise God made to us through Jesus: in dying for our old life, Christ has given us new life!! It can be trusted; it always works!! When the selfish self dies, the resurrected self rises! Jesus Christ has shown us this way of reconciliation rather than revenge. Let us surrender to his way today and always -- so that there will always be a secure and permanent place of love for spouses and children here on earth.

AMEN.

*Pentecost XX
First English Lutheran Church, Toledo
October 21, 2001
Peter R. Martyn, Part-time Interim*

PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. Luke 18:1

For some 2000 years Christians have been praying, *“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven.”* Has anything really changed with all of our prayers *“for God’s will to be done?”* Is God’s kingdom more visible today that it was in the 1st century? More visible than during the Reformation? Sadly, **THINGS HAVEN’T CHANGED MUCH IN 2000 YEARS!** Although Christ has come ... and we believe He will come again ... we have not yet seen his kingdom fully dominate this world. And yet today’s message remains the same: **“Don’t lose heart! Hang in there! Keep on praying for his will to be done!! Be persistent! Don’t give up! Pray Without Ceasing!”**

It reminds me of the story of two 10-year olds, Ben and Eric. Ben had just been given a new game for his Nintendo and Eric was really impressed. So Eric said to Ben: **“You mean your parents just gave you the game & it wasn’t Christmas or anything?! How did you work that??”** Ben answered, **“I just asked and asked and asked. I asked them until they got so sick of hearing me ask that they gave in and bought it.”** Eric responded: **“Are you sure that’s all you did? No extra chores or babysitting or any of that stuff???”** And Ben answered, **“Nope. I just asked and asked ... asked and asked again!!”**

Obviously, we don’t always get what we ask for ... but if we really want justice and righteousness, then we must persistently ask for it and seek it. That was the example of the widow in the parable. Widows in NT times were viewed as little more than dirt; yet this woman had a legitimate claim. The lazy, faithless and uncompassionate judge made clear that he was not in the mood to help her. The widow was totally alone. **But she didn’t lose heart – she persisted ... she prayed without ceasing for justice ... she became a persistent nag ... and it was her persistence that finally accomplished the victory.** She asked and asked and kept on asking until the arrogant judge finally gave in.

That’s the teaching about prayer from this parable – that prayer is not merely verbal talk thrown up to heaven. **But prayer is a basic attitude of never giving up on asking a much more loving & compassionate God for His will to be done.** It may not happen today; it may not happen tomorrow, but with persistence, it will happen!! “To pray without ceasing” reveals at least three realities of faith between God & his people.

First, faithfulness (or praying without ceasing) always means STRUGGLE!
Today’s OT lesson finds Jacob after two decades still struggling to be reconciled

to his brother, Esau. He had become a rich and prosperous man with 2 wives and 11 children ... but after 21 years he was still at odds with his brother. Now he was returning to the homeland; yet he is still wrestling with God & Esau!! Likewise, Jeremiah struggled to be God's messenger. Similarly, Job struggled to remain faithful to God after his great misfortune. And Paul struggled to remain faithful after his conversion; one of his great prayers was "*O God, I do the things that I know I shouldn't, and I don't do the things that I know I should!*" And the greatest prayer-struggle was Jesus' own encounter at Gethsemane. He wrestled with God, praying that the cup of sacrifice might be removed ... but finally concluded by saying, "*not my will, but thine be done!*"

That is always the persistent & final focus of our prayers: What does God want to be done?? First English has been praying for months for a just outcome for its future mission; those prayers will become visible again tomorrow evening: What does God want?? America has been praying for weeks for justice and God's will to be done after the horrendous attack of Sept. 11th. Both of these situations are still in the stage of ongoing struggle; we keep on praying without ceasing "WHAT DOES GOD WANT TO BE DONE?" We don't know the outcomes yet, but we confidently ask for God's justice to be victorious!

Secondly, faithfulness (or praying without ceasing) not only means struggle – it also means **SEEKING GOD'S PRESENCE!** That's why God commands that every person must be baptized into his family ... because it is through baptism that God gives us the gift of his presence. In Baptism God says to Taylor this day: "*I will be with you always ... I will never leave you ... I will be present to hear you and guide you ... I will always forgive you and bless you.*" In baptism God promises forever & ever his abiding presence.

But God's abiding presence must be strengthened and nurtured in every baptized life. That's why parents and sponsors must promise to provide the foundations of faith to every baptized child. And not only a lifetime of teaching and worshipping ... it's also a lifetime of "praying without ceasing." From infancy on – children must be encouraged to pray and pray and pray to God ... that prayer always enables us to be in God's presence.

The proof of that reality has been revealed to us by the tremendous number of prayer moments or prayer services that have been held since Sept. 11th! All of these moments have been opportunities to seek God's presence and direction for our nation ... moments where we recognize there is no greater strength or help for this country than thru the presence of our God. And God assures us that as we keep on asking & asking for his presence – he will not abandon or forsake us ... he will guide us to justice, healing and the peace of Christ ... he will not allow us to lose heart ... he will reveal the **WAY** of ultimate victory!

Finally, with God's abiding presence through prayer, God tells us what we can so easily forget when we do not pray: **THAT WE HAVE BEEN BLESSED IN ORDER THAT WE MIGHT ALWAYS BE A BLESSING TO OTHERS.** That sounds so simple and elementary, but it can easily be forgotten especially when

living in a time of threats of terror and biological warfare. Our temptation in threatening times is to run scared ... to lose heart ... to retreat & box ourselves up in whatever we see as security. But prayer reminds us that our greatest security in these times is to be just like God ... not to be retreating or running away from others, but to be blessing and uplifting others (just like Geo Bush told our children). God turned the momentary horror of Good Friday into the everlasting joy of Easter Sunday! Bad news, terror and death will not have the last word with God ... because his kingdom has defeated those realities!

But sometimes the mood of the moment becomes the overwhelming spirit and dictating power of the day. Sometimes we fail to pray without ceasing and we lose sight of the magnitude of God's blessings to us. Sometimes we get so caught up with the momentary bad news that we lose sight of the everlasting bounty of our blessings.

That was certainly the case of the Pennsylvania pastor who allowed his momentary mood of anger to overshadow his ability to be God's blessing to others. Years earlier this pastor was shepherding a small Penn. parish during depression times. He was often paid in food & clothing. But this October, the daughter of the richest man in the county was to be married in his church. It was the biggest wedding the little church and county had ever seen. After the wonderful ceremony, the wealthy man came into the pastor's study with a shoe box. He offered it to the pastor as a gift for his services. The pastor opened it and found a pair of leather gloves. With proper thanks given, the wealthy man left his office. Then the pastor threw the box of gloves into his desk – totally angered and disgusted with the wealthy man's cheap gift.

Over the next 30 years, the pastor carried that box to three more congregations. He'd move the box from one desk to another, never even trying on the gloves. Finally, as he reached retirement and was cleaning his last desk – he took out the box and tried on the gloves. His fingers wouldn't go into the holes. He reached into the thumb, only to find a \$100 bill; then another finger – another \$100 bill. All ten fingers were stuffed with \$100 bills. In the last thumb was a note: *"Dear pastor: I know you are a man who prays for God's WILL without ceasing: use these gifts to foster God's kingdom of kindness & goodness on earth and to support your own family. I love you and I adore Christ our Lord."*

How tragic that God blesses us abundantly each day; but because of momentary moods or threatening times ... sometimes we overlook his goodness and leave it all boxed up where it can't help anyone. But God continues to offer his abiding presence to us through all our struggles: we are forgiven so that we can forgive -- we are loved so that we can love -- we are blessed so that we can be a blessing to others. Let us pray without ceasing that we will not allow our present troubles to cause us to lose heart! Through prayer, we have been given the heart, mind, soul and strength of God ... and with God's presence of peace, love & mercy, we can bless others even in the midst of bad times.

Amen.