

EPIPHANY VI

Redeemer Lutheran Church - Milwaukee

February 17, 1974

"ULTIMATE SECURITY"

Although all three texts serve to undergird today's message, the wisdom sayings from Jeremiah provide more significantly to the overall theme: Quote Jeremiah 17:5-8.

As you reflect upon the history of your life, what would you isolate as the most constant desire of your life? What concern has occupied a majority of moments of your life? What goal has nearly always displaced other aims of yours? When faced with choices between jobs, or friends, or schools, or places to live -- what single factor almost without exception dominated your decision?

Although it's always dangerous to generalize, I would venture to bet that most of us would answer these questions with the same term or a synonym for it - namely, SECURITY. That one factor which we covet - which we seek -- which we desire and need from the delivery room to our dying bed IS SECURITY. Throughout life, we seek to strategically order our existence to be free from danger, poverty, despair and destruction. To do differently suggests masochism or a degree of insanity.

And so at birth, we desire a sterile atmosphere for baby, mother, and now often father. When baby is born, he needs the security of constant tender, loving care. As baby becomes child, he requires a protective-corrective environment. As child becomes adolescent, he needs the security of acceptance from his peer group and an educational foundation for the future.

From adolescence to mature adulthood, security dominates the human drive. Continuing education, insurance policies, employment

and promotion possibilities, salary increases, good neighborhoods, supportive working associates, faithful-compassionate marriage partners -- all these considerations and many more point to our ever-present desire and need for security.

And yet as much as these are necessary and good, we can become totally obsessed with any one of them or all of them. Instead of being the MEANS to an enjoyable, fulfilling life, these securities can become ends in themselves. They can become the ultimate source of our trust in life -- thus they become the source of meaning and purpose for our lives.

It is at that point that we have committed our trust to man and his achievements. And it is at that point that Jeremiah proclaims:

Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

Jeremiah is saying that when man sees his **ULTIMATE SECURITY** -- that is, his salvation-- in terms of education, or insurance premiums, or bank accounts, or any of the hundreds of securities that we can attach life's worth to, then man **HAS BROUGHT A CURSE UPON HIMSELF**.

We might be tempted to say that such a state of affairs will never come into existence. With you, I pray that this may always be true. But I do believe the height of hedonism in our present age has brought us far too close to the realization of man's total trust in man.

I can only wonder, for instance, with the present state of our energy crisis that we *have*

nearly pledged total trust in our conglomerate oil industry. And now we seem to be on the receiving end of a curse for our trust. Similarly we have so often BLINDLY deferred complete trust to a political party - or to a governing official -- ONLY NOW to be faced with the pathetic curse of a Watergate and a constant stream of corruption disclosures.

These situations and others today have caused most of us to feel helpless and demoralized. We might even say we're suffering from at least a slight insecurity complex. [But we have not come here this morning to have our feelings of insecurity intensified. Hopefully, we have come here to confess them and our part in creating them -- and then to receive new courage to face them with hope.

God desires that we leave here SO RENEWED. And to do this, he uses Jeremiah, Paul, and St. Luke today to remind us that WE WILL ALWAYS SUFFER A CURSE IF WE SURRENDER OUR TRUST TO THE TEMPORARY SECURITIES OF LIFE. And in this present age, God uses crises in energy, government, and even our personal lives TO ALERT US TO THE FACT THAT OUR PRIORITIES IN LIVING HAVE BEEN ANCHORED TOO HEAVILY TO OUR OWN FLESH. ^{OFTEN} AND DESIRES.

So it is that the Lukan evangelist says: Woe is he who sees his ultimate security in riches, for he has received his consolation. Woe is he who finds real security in the fulness of his stockpiles, or his pleasures, or his honor, for he will have his final reward in these things.

The Lukan evangelist is not condemning anyone who has riches, pleasure, or honor. But he is calling all such persons to put these securities of life into proper perspective. He is saying: He who invests his ultimate security in earthly vessels WILL in the end be rewarded with insecurity.

In other words, Jeremiah, Paul, and Luke all claim that ULTIMATE SECURITY in life can only be realized when we use the securities of life TO THE GLORY AND HONOR OF GOD -- when we use life's securities to accomplish the will of God. They further claim, especially through Paul, that we do this NOT to earn favor with God, but rather BECAUSE GOD HAS FIRST PROMISED US ULTIMATE SECURITY THROUGH CHRIST-- NAMELY, THROUGH THE RESURRECTION.

In short, when Jeremiah says: 'Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,' we understand by this that a man shows his trust in God by offering his securities of life in service to his Lord. Thus we demonstrate our trust in God as we offer our minds, bodies, and possessions to carry out his will of love.

But more importantly, we adopt this sacrificial lifestyle, NOT because it is demanded-- NOT because we are forced to -- NOT because it is the easy way, but rather, BECAUSE GOD ^{1st} HAS PROMISED US ULTIMATE SECURITY THROUGH THE RESURRECTION.

And resurrection from our Christian understanding means NOT only a transformation of body -- it means a transformation of reality. To believe and receive the promise of Christ's resurrection MEANS that we believe that THE POWER OF HIS LOVE CAN TRANSFORM the hideous insecurities of life INTO A NEW STATE OF BEING.

Yes, we believe that the promise of the resurrection is offered to us right now through Christ's presence as well as at the end of life. And we believe that promise RIGHT NOW has the loving power to turn even the most hideous corruption -- the most hideous national or individual crisis -- yes, the most shocking insecurity INTO A NEW STATE OF BEING-- INTO A NEW STATE OF LIFE.

Our very presence here witnesses to our desire

to experience and share that promise. Our presence manifests our sacrificial willingness to use our securities -- our talents and gifts of life -- to transform the hideous insecurities of life INTO A NEW STATE OF BEING. We are here to receive God's promise - to be transformed into a new state of being -- so that we will be ready and willing to offer ourselves as living sacrifices in the service of our Lord.

So let us now receive the promise and power of Christ's resurrected love as we become one with him at his table. His presence of love in this sacrament is our promise of ultimate security. To receive this transforming power means that it is ours to share -- with our spouses, with our children, with our parents, with our friends, with persons everywhere who are feeling the insecurity of misdirected trust.

So let us offer this gift of real security. And as we continue to return to be renewed in the same gift, God will again remind us of his never-ending promise of ultimate security - the resurrection from the dead, yes, the transformation of life to a new state of Being in Jesus Christ.

Amen

THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY



FIRST LESSON
Jeremiah 17:5-8

Thus says the Lord:

“Cursed is the man who trusts in man
and makes flesh his arm,
whose heart turns away from the
Lord.

He is like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see any good come.
He shall dwell in the parched places of
the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.

“Blessed is the man who trusts in the
Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.

He is like a tree planted by water,
that sends out its roots by the
stream,
and does not fear when heat comes,
for its leaves remain green,
and is not anxious in the year of
drought,
for it does not cease to bear fruit.”

SECOND LESSON
1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20

St. Paul writes:

Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? . . . For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

GOSPEL
Luke 6:17-26

Jesus came down with *his apostles* and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came forth from him and healed them all.

And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said:

“Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh.

“Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

“But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger.

“Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

“Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.”

EPIPHANY VI

Epiph Church of the Master, Troy
Feb. 15, 1976

"NO LIMITS"

"Be clean." Mark 1:41b

The text before us (I'm certain) has occasioned its share of sermons along the lines of dermatology. For the sake of sensationalism, the preacher can use the ulceration of leprosy as a meaningful gimmick.

Which one of us hasn't heard how a leper's face ulcerates as the nodules grow larger and larger - as the foul discharge oozes -- as the eyebrows fall out and the eyes become staring. The voice gets hoarse, the breath wheezes, and slowly the sufferer becomes a mass of ulcerated growths. After the nine year course of the disease, the person ends in mental decay, coma, and ultimately death.

Such is the gruesome and repulsive picture of leprosy. But today's theme is not one of the dermatological effects of leprosy -- but rather, the UTTER transformation of life (or call it healing, making whole) when we are touched by God's power.

It is this theme that is acted out through Jesus and the leper in Mark's narrative. In the three responses of Jesus, we encounter the radical transforming thrust of the Gospel, namely, God's power to make things reunited or whole.

The first deals with leprosy itself. Not so much is this lesson about a medical condition, as it is about a state of being UNDER GOD. Leprosy HERE represents that condition known as sin - that state of being wherein a man is alienated from God and possibly his fellowman.

And the first action or response of Jesus in this text IS TO CLEANSE ---- to cleanse in response to the request for help. ESPECIALLY to cleanse those suffering the exclusion of mankind.

As Christians, we are therefore AGAIN reminded of the first nature or thrust of the GOOD NEWS -- it is one of INCLUSIVENESS. To anyone who turns to God or his people for help, it must be offered-- regardless of the person's past or present human condition.

The gospel of Christ FIRST and FOREMOST proclaims a "NO LIMITS" policy. Anyone who turns to the father or his community of faith IS TO BE OFFERED his power of love.

Do we really catch the power of this first thrust?? This is really - dy-no-mite!! Because you know and I know that our first temptation in life is to be exclusive.

We often are tempted to offer the good news TO ONLY "good church members." We're often tempted to withhold GENUINE LOVE from those who may have moral blemish on their record.

But Jesus makes it plain here. "NO LIMITS" -- that's his policy and his church's policy for anyone who turns for help -- regardless of race, clan, or moral condition. ALL ARE WELCOME, BECAUSE ALL ARE SINFUL. There are no limits because ALL NEED the cleansing power of God's sacraments and fellowship.

But - as one member legitimately stated one day --just because Christ sought out and dined with the outcasts, does that mean they are to remain UN-CHANGED. By no means. There are no limits to God's grace, but there is a transformation of our lives BECAUSE OF IT!!

And that's Jesus' second response. He tells the leper to go to the priests. Why? First, so that the healing is made official in the proper way; and second, so that the leper will exhibit a disciplined response of thanks.

Jesus' instructions are the same today. The church is still his official house on earth. He still directs ALL WHO HAVE RECEIVED HIS POWER to witness to it through the church.

Obviously - that does not make church people

into superior people -- they are often quite the opposite. But it means THAT CHURCH PEOPLE are remaining in touch with the source of healing love for all people -- they are remaining within the reach of their Father.

And that is the discipline that Jesus expects from the leper -- and each of us. It is through his fellowship on earth THAT WE ARE CONSTANTLY REMINDED of our condition of sin AND his power of making us whole again.

Without that dynamic influence in our lives, we run the risk of being like the leper without a cure -- the risk of dying IN SIN. The risk of dying without A ~~REUNION~~ ^{PROPER} WITH THE FATHER.

Thus - as we have just again shared THRU John's Baptism -- we have shared God's power of love for John Woodsmall. But that power can be lost if not nurtured. And so like Jesus sends the leper to the priests -- we commission the parents and sponsors TO A DISCIPLINED response. ^{responsibility}

We do this - not to make it a rigid or meaningless church rule -- but we do this so that John will remember forever AND LIVE ACCORDINGLY the forgiving life of Christ.

And that leads to Jesus' 3rd response. He tells the leper in the same sentence NOT TO TELL ANYONE WHAT HE HAS DONE. I've always found that a strange instruction. And it still puzzles me. Could Jesus mean that he doesn't want us to spread the NEWS of his love???

For sure - that's not what he means! What he's meaning here is that he seeks a deeper goal than miracles of external change -- he desires the very heart of the person to be evoked.

The leper's disobedience to Jesus' injunction suggests that his healing was only an external thing. He has not become a true disciple -- he has made Jesus into a walking hospital. And Jesus was that, but much more. His love does more than heal sores, it transforms relationships.

So where was this leper and all the countless persons who were healed by Jesus when he was betrayed - brought to trial - offered to the crowd - and finally crucified. Evidently they had only seen Jesus as a miracle worker -- not a ~~Laker~~ who enables us to live EVEN WITH OUR BURDENS.

A dermatologist once observed that his patients urgently wanted a medicine they ~~could~~ put on their skin to cure their disease -- but the majority of these patients always resisted any prescription that would change their diet or their way of life. How true it is.

So often we have the symptoms treated and healed, but resist the deeper transformation that requires A NEW WAY OF LIVING. Yes - the third thrust of this gospel is telling us that God's love in Christ ~~IF IT'S REAL~~ is more than skin deep.

If attending church is motivated by some obligatory code -- if being Baptized is just fulfilling a social or superstitious ~~action~~ -- if Communion is just a routine monthly trip to the altar --- then Christ's love has gone NO DEEPER THAN THE SURFACE.

My friends - I am prayerfully hopeful and confident that we're all here this morning FOR MORE THAN AN EXTERNAL CURE.

I am absolutely confident of this much -- we've all received the miraculous gift of life -- we've all received the miraculous gift of forgiveness thru the sacraments and thru our human relationships of love.

So - we've all received the ULTIMATE CURE -- the cure that's deeper than skin deep -- the cure that transforms our relationships -- the cure that heals guilt and division. So - let's live that cure NOT FROM THE SURFACE but from the heart -- because we ~~have experienced the REUNITING~~ power of God in Jesus ~~christ.~~ *men made clean by*

AMEN

EPIPHANY VI
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
2-18-79

"AMEN!"

"For all the promises of God find their "YES" in Christ. That is why we utter the AMEN through him" II Cor 1:20-21

Paul had spent two grueling years developing the church at Corinth. As any of you know who have been part of a new mission congregation -- these are tough years! They take dedication... and perseverance ... and struggle ... and commitment ... and prayer ... and countless hours of energy. It is no easy thing to establish a new church -- whether in Corinth or in Troy.

Finally - after two years Paul left Corinth-- leaving this church in the hands of competent leaders. But soon after his departure -- factions developed in the church. The church was becoming divided -- some were following Paul - some were rallying around Cephas - some around Apollos -- some even wanted to form the "Christ" party.

Believe me - this is no imaginay story. There are still members of this congregation today who retain loyalty to certain pastors of the past. Regretably - their loyalty has been to human pastors instead of to their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Well - when Paul learned that this church was going down the drain -- he made a return visit only to realize that his presence merely intensified the pain. And so he wrote a letter and dispatched his faithful aid - Titus. He hoped that Titus could restore peace and unity and strength to the Corinthian Church.

But as with some congregations today -- there was a group of ringleaders who opposed Paul -- they were trying to discredit his ministry.

So when Titus came on the scene - they went around waving the letter of Paul saying that he had broken his promise. They claimed that he had said "yes" to them - that he would return, but now he was saying "No" by sending Titus instead. They were accusing Paul of being a servant of God who could not be trusted -- they were saying that his word was not reliable -- that he was saying "Yes" when he really meant "No."

Obviously - they had misconstrued his message. By sending Titus - he was fulfilling his word to the Corinthian Church -- in fact, Paul felt Titus would stand a better chance than he himself. It was Paul's last ditch effort to save the Corinthian Church from division & destruction.

Paul was fulfilling his promise through Titus! He was not only saying "Yes," but he was using great wisdom in sending a pastor into that situation who had a neutral image -- a pastor who could bring all the diverse elements back into a united body of Christ. Through the power of Christ in the ministry of Titus -- Paul was saying a resounding "YES" to the Corinthian Church

And yet the issue which the Corinthians unfairly foisted on Paul IS PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST CRITICAL DIFFICULTIES BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE of the church today. It is the matter of credibility - of integrity - of truth. Of as our text says today - the matter of saying "Yes" but then living as if to say "No."

In almost every sector of life today -- we see this incurable credibility cancer. People say "yes" in marriage and yet live as if to say "no" in reality.

Baptism "Yes" - havn't seen some since.
Church membership "yes" - only to say "no"
when they realize that there is a cost
to be a disciple of Christ.

PEOPLE SAY "Yes" to nice suburban communities - but live as if to say "No" -3-

Kids who are willing to say "yes" to their parents for 15, 16, 17 years -- they say "yes" to all the handouts of a good home... and then all of a sudden after they've had the good life from mom & dad -- they say "no" when mom or dad asks for a little responsibility.

For the first time in US History - there are more people over 25 who are single than married -- I believe this reflects a fear of getting caught in a broken promise ... so rather than a broken promise -- the philosophy of the day IS TO MAKE NO PROMISES AT ALL. Needless to say - I don't think this style of life IS RIGHT -- but it is surely UNDERSTANDABLE in light of all the brokenness in our world!!

We need only look at our paranoid world briefly to understand the tragic results *saying Yes* but *living NO* -- namely brokenness - division - and chaos. Whenever we try to divinize any human system -- ~~the end~~ result (no matter how great the intentions) fails the eternal test of integrity. *Humanism alone will not bridge the chasm of credibility.*

And yet through one human - Paul Hirstens to show there can be a life of integrity.
Only in Jesus Christ has the world encountered a man who fulfilled his promises -- who said "yes" to humankind and delivered the goods -- a man who made good on God's promises and his own own!

In Jesus Christ - there is a "Yes" that humanity can depend upon. When Christ says "yes" then we can say "AMEN" to it -- it is most certainly true!!

And this world is desperately in need of a personal power of affirmation that can be trusted! This world is desperately searching for a dependable "Yes." *and Jesus Christ has*

And Jesus Christ has already blanketed every soul in this world with the security of his "Yes." He has said "Yes, you are forgiven; yes, you are loved; yes, you are worth more than any other creature; yes, you are a child of God; yes, you shall have eternal life... all these and whatever else is the will of my Father -- I say YES to!

This is why we proclaim Jesus as our Lord and Savior -- because HE IS THE ONLY ONE WHO CONTINUALLY SAYS "YES" TO US AND REALLY MEANS IT!! His "Yes" does not mean "NO" -- it personifies the ultimate power of integrity -- it is the very absolute in credibility -- it is the eternal promise that the world is looking for - so often in the wrong places and from the wrong things!

We are the church -- that body of people in the world who have heard Jesus Christ say "Yes" -- in his teaching, in his preaching, in his healing, in his resurrection! His whole life and ministry SOUGHT TO FULFILL ONE PURPOSE -- to lift up human life to the highest level of credibility through the power of love! There is no power with greater credibility or integrity - than HIS POWER OF LOVE.

That power is God's "Yes." Whether it be the Sacrament of the Altar or the Bounty of the Earth -- God is in all things SAYING "Yes" saying that we are loved and we are his!

He calls us to respond to his Yes by living life with a never-ending AMEN - amen! amen! amen! meaning - it is most certainly true! meaning we are loved -- meaning we are forgiven meaning we are no longer broken, but made whole again in Christ! Yes - only one response to God's never ending "Yes" -- our never-ending "AMEN" -- saying, teaching, preaching, healing

each other with the "yes" of Christ's love.

AMEN! AMEN! AMEN!

IT IS MOST CERTAINLY TRUE! AMEN!

EPIPHANY VI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
February 15, 1987
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"CHOOSE LIFE!"

"Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him." Deut. 30:19 "For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."
Matthew 5:20-21

In Holy Baptism, God makes a choice -- he chooses you and me to be his eternal heirs. What a marvelous choice he makes -- forever blessing us with his abundant life, forever forgiving us, forever freeing us from the slavery of sin, forever empowering us to serve and give like Christ! Wow! Isn't it marvelous to be chosen by God!?

But not only does he make this marvelous choice -- he still gives us the freedom to choose -- the freedom to thank and praise him. He allows us to follow or to fall away ... to fulfill his love or to frolic in our own foolishness ... to choose his way of life or to succumb to our own destiny of death. Yes, even after he has chosen us, he does not force us to PLAY THE GAME BY HIS RULES.

I told the Lunches with Luther group on Tuesday that our culture is far too sports dominated ... and here I go again with a sports illustration. Just shows that I can't shake off the culture. Maybe you've heard the college football story of the coach who was faced with a real dilemma: His number one quarterback had been sidelined by illness ... and his number two quarterback was now out with an injury. He was left with only a freshman quarterback who had absolutely no game experience. It was first down -- the ball was resting on their own 3-yd line -- that meant they had 97 yds to go for a T.D. The coach's strategy was to get them away from the goalline ... and then punt.

He told the freshman: "Now you go in there and hand-off to Jones, our big fullback, for two plays ... just run it up the middle both times. Then on the third play, just punt the ball -- you got it, punt the ball!" The freshman followed orders perfectly. On the first play, he handed off to Jones; Jones found a hole and scampered to the 50 yd line. On the second play, another hand-off to Jones -- this time Jones found a hole off left tackle and ran to the opposition's four yard line - just 12 feet from a T.D. Confidently, the team lined up -- the ball was snapped -- the freshman dropped back and punted the ball into the stands. As the team came off the field the coach angrily grabbed the freshman and yelled: "What in the world were you thinking of when you ran that play?" And the freshman answered: "I was thinking - what a dumb coach we have!"

We laugh - but it appears that many coaches today are just like that one -- they want to call all the shots. Even in the NFL, few quarterbacks are calling the plays. All the choices are being made by the bench. And this graphically illustrates how our sports world and spiritual worlds are very different -- God does not make the choices for us. He has paid us the ultimate compliment -- he allows us to call our own plays in this game called life. In Genesis -- he reminds us that "he has put us in charge of all that is." In creating us in his own image, he has endowed humanity with a gift that separates us from all others -- the ability to choose life or death.

Needless to say, I am somewhat troubled by people who say that "they are waiting for God to tell them what choices to make." God does not specify our moves from a predetermined gamebook like a football coach. He gives us a way of living (called the way of Christ)... and then asks us to fulfill that way, that life, and that truth in every choice that we make. But he calls us to make the choices -- he does not make them for us.

And so the first story he tells us is the story of Adam and Eve (our story). God gave them everything that was good -- everything they needed to sustain and enjoy life. And then in the middle of the garden, he planted the tree of knowledge of good and evil. That tree represented the human freedom to choose: to be obedient to God, or to choose what appears to be more advantageous to self. The choice was obvious -- a divine paradise or a human pit!

The choice of life or death. Absurd many will say -- humanity will always choose life!! Who would ever choose death?? Every young person in this room is aware of the physical harm that comes from smoking cigarettes. The link between lung cancer and heart disease is almost indisputable today. And yet, millions of teenagers will become habitual smokers this year. They will choose death, rather than life. And the same thing can be said for drugs and alcohol. The price of addiction is death, not life. And millions continue to choose death rather than life.

Some three thousand years ago, Moses stood before the people of Israel with the same choice. And he proclaimed: "Choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God." God has not changed his game plan -- the choice is still ours. Will it be life, or death? Well, let's look at what it means to "Choose Life?"

It should be graphically obvious from today's texts that "choosing life" means choosing God's goals for our lives -- sharing his destiny for creation, rather than merely our own limited goals. What does it mean to share God's destiny -- to live with Godly goals? Possibly some of you have seen the BERRY'S WORLD cartoon that shows a street person sitting on a

*the way
of righteousness*

sidewalk. Beside him is a large sign reading: "KEEPING MY OPTIONS OPEN. THANK YOU." That's the way many folks live -- making no commitment to anything ... always sitting on the fence -- thinking that life requires no ultimate choices -- always keeping their options open. According to our Christian faith, ~~that is the way of death ... it is a way which requires no commitment, no decision, no faithfulness, no God!~~

It was the choice of Brer Rabbit in that famous Uncle Remus story. Brer Rabbit was invited on the same evening to dinner at Brer Terrapin's and Brer Possum's home. He stood hungrily at the crossroads ... "Do I eat with Brer Terrapin or Brer Possum?" First he ran down the road to Brer Possums ... then down the road to Brer Terrapin's. Then he changed his mind and started back to Brer Possum's. With the thought of two meals waiting for him, he kept running back and forth, unable to make a choice, until finally he missed dinner at both places.

That is so often the way of those without Godly goals -- just running from this fad to that fancy, running here and running there, but having no ultimate commitment for anything. But those who "Choose Life" choose Godly goals -- having no other gods, regularly praising and thanking God, not lying, not killing, not committing adultery or coveting one's neighbor, speaking truthfully in a world of falsehood and coverups, sharing their bread and their money with the hungry and hopeless, and above all shedding God's light into the dark corners of this world. As Pastor Bob said last week, we are God's people of "light" -- and we are forever seeking to be his ray of healing and hope for others in this world. We "Choose Life" by choosing Godly goals ... being obedient to the lofty standards of our Lord (even though we know that we'll never perfectly achieve those goals).

destiny

Secondly, to "Choose Life" means to "live from the heart rather than only from the head." It's easy to send Valentines Cards with mushy messages. AND I'M THANKFUL I RECEIVED SEVERAL. But "saying the words" is often only living from the head. It's knowing what is right, but not always being totally right with others. It's living by the righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes. They always knew the right things to say ... they had all the right answers, but they did not live by a "love of the heart" ... by an attitude of deep compassion and concern for others.

Jesus said, "It was said of old, but I say unto you." Jesus was saying that the law of love goes beyond the mere words and rules -- it is lived from the heart. The Pharisees prided themselves on "not murdering" anyone, but they lived with seething anger toward everyone who did not live up to the letter of the law. And Jesus said, such anger is murderous -- it kills loving, compassionate, caring relationships. In short, Jesus is saying that the act of murder is sinful ... but the attitude of "anger" that precedes the act is often more sinful BECAUSE IT PRECIPITATES THE ACTION.

The anger "of the heart" is certainly as murderous as the act of the weapon.

Valentines Day, or any other expression of love, is pretty empty if it only comes from the head or the hand. It is so easy to offer the right words ... or the appropriate box of candy ... but have no commitment of the heart. Without the deep, abiding attitude of the heart, our actions are often just cheap expressions of external love. God's love is never of that variety.

His love is possibly best illustrated in the prophetic example of Hosea, who married a faithless whore named, Gomer. Gomer prostitutes around the countryside, but Hosea continues to go after her bringing her back home. As he brings her home through the narrow streets, everyone laughs at him. But he keeps on doing this until Gomer finally realizes that his love is more than words or empty actions -- it comes deep from the heart, it is abiding, it will not be changed even by her unfaithfulness. "Choosing Life" is choosing God's love ... which is loving from the heart!!

But that of course leads to the ultimate expression of "Choosing Life" -- choosing God's Grace, which is choosing Jesus Christ. For there's not one of us in this room who has fully and completely lived by "God's lofty standards or goals" or "fully loved from the heart." We all have fallen short of God's choices for us -- and thus, our ultimate choice can only be ~~his choice~~ ~~of us~~ -- GRACE THROUGH FAITH -- TRUSTING HIS FORGIVENESS ABOVE ALL WHEN WE HAVE FALLEN SHORT!!

For as was illustrated by Adam and Eve ... and has been illustrated ever since to the present day -- FAR TOO OFTEN WE CHOOSE DEATH OVER LIFE. We're reminded of that choice by the old but classic story of the farmer and his newlywed wife. The story was born in the era before the automobile. So after the wedding, the farmer and his new wife were rambling down the country rode in their carriage. All seemed to be ecstasy, until suddenly the horse decided to come to a dead stop. The farmer responded by getting out of the carriage and walking over to the horse. Standing nose to nose with him, he said: "Now that's once!"

He returned to the carriage, snapped the reins, and off they went again. All was again going well, when the horse decided to abruptly stop. Again, the farmer got out of the carriage and went nose to nose with the horse, saying: "Now that's twice." When the farmer returned to his seat, they bolted off at a gallop. Again, all went well until the horse jolted to a third stop. This time the farmer got out of the carriage, pulled out his revolver, and fatally shot his obstinate horse. His new bride, totally shocked by this behavior, finally said somewhat apprehensively: "Honey, don't you think that action was a little rash." Whereupon he looked he squarely in the FACE and said, "Now that's once!"

7/16
To choose
what's
ACROSS
PROMISE

Just like the farmer, we often choose "death" as our way of dealing with the difficulties of life -- we choose anger and prejudice, we choose slander and sarcasm, we choose violence and vindication, we choose deceit and dirty pool. Thankfully, God knows of our weaknesses and impotence in fulfilling his goals. And rather than condemning us, he forgives us IN ORDER THAT WE MIGHT LIVE ANEW TO HIS GOALS AND LOVE FROM THE HEART.

IN SHORT, GOD MAKES A GREATER CHOICE FOR US THAN WE DO FOR OURSELVES -- HE GIVES US THE LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST AS A GIFT. And in GIVING US JESUS CHRIST, HE HAS AGAIN GIVEN US THE GREATEST OPTION -- TO CHOOSE LIFE. That is why you and I are here again today -- BECAUSE WE HAVE CHOSEN LIFE ... WE HAVE CHOSEN to be renewed by Jesus Christ so that we might live anew to God's lofty goals and in so doing love more completely from the heart.

AMEN.

EPIPHANY VI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
February 11, 1990
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"SPACE FOR GRACE"

Jesus taught them saying, "For I tell you unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." Matt. 5:20

For the past three Sundays, we have heard the DIVINE IMPERATIVES to faithful living. "Be pure in heart; be merciful; be compassionate; be humble & pure; be peacemakers; be sacrificial; be the salt of the earth; be a light in the world; be non-violent; be pure in word and deed; be faithfully devout in marriage; be totally trustworthy!" The Sermon on the Mount allows very little "R & R" for the Christian -- instead it posits lofty standards, tough teachings, penultimate principles of faithfulness.

Whether weekly church goes or not, most of us have some basic knowledge of these Christian principles. Almost every person here knows at least one Beatitude; every Sunday School student remembers the exhortations to be the salt of the earth; likewise, we've all sung "this little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine ... hide it under a bushel, NO!"

But instead of getting relief today from the demands for righteous living -- we get more foundational teachings of faithfulness. Not only are we to abide by the 5th commandment "thou shalt not kill," but even insult, slander and anger are violations of Jesus' interpretation of murder. Likewise, not only must we reject adultery, but even a lustful look deserves the punishment of dismemberment of eyes and limbs. Likewise according to Jesus' standard of righteousness nothing less than unchastity justifies separation or divorce. And lawyers - according to Jesus there is absolutely no need for contracts in the kingdom of God -- a person's word of "yes" or "No" is all that's required. Anything more is of the devil!

Whoever said that the way of Christ is the easy way? We all have heard these sayings from the Sermon on the Mount, and we all have professed them to be true! We know they are the Way, the Truth, and the Life of Christian conviction! As Larry said last week -- there is no "fine print" among Jesus' teachings ... he lays out the whole truth and nothing but the truth for all to see. No loopholes ... no unknowns with this Lord. We all know the Way of the Lord ...and we all know its the right way -- yet, we all live contrary to it! Oh, we may not be lustful ... we may not be divorced ... but not one of us lives without anger, without contracts, without hiding our faith under a bushel. If there's one thing the Sermon on the Mount does for all of us -- it drives us to our knees ... it makes us aware that we have all fallen short of the righteousness of Christ. Or as St Paul says: "I know what is right, and yet I so often find myself doing what I know is wrong!"

We'd like to believe that all the unrighteous livers are down on Jefferson Street or in the Missons on Monroe Avenue. But we know how untrue that is! There's as much anger and slander right here among us as there is outside of these hallowed walls! The demons of lust are not only present in the porno palaces and nude dancing bars -- they are lurking right here in the hearts and minds of the committed, convicted, conscientious servants of Jesus Christ. We know that the divorce rate among the faithful is not substantially better than outside this sanctuary of fidelity. And some of you in this very room have been deeply burned by what you thought were promisory trusts between other believers!

The times they are a changing, but the practices of the faithful remain the same. We all know the divine imperatives ... we know the rules of faithful living ... we know the way of righteousness, but we so often choose to live contrary to it! Back in 1728 - William Law addressed this same issue in a book he titled: "A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life." Dr Law answered the question of unrighteous living by simply saying "that most Christians never really "intend" to live to please God. Their intentions, their plans, their aims, their goals are very clear and evident in other areas of life -- but they seldom really intend "to do God's will." There are certainly some Christians even at Hope Lutheran who fit this profile. I am angered sometimes in talking to some of our parents at the excuses and rationalizations used to avoid conviction, avoid faithfulness, avoid the lofty principles of Christ in their family priorities. They sometimes even have the guts to admit to me that their pleasures, their pursuits, their comforts, and their luxuries take precedence over any faithfulness to God and his intention for their lives.

But thankfully - this profile fits only a small minority at Hope and among most Christians. Most of us want to show a devout faithfulness to Christ's principles, but find ourselves always falling short. Is it any wonder that we believe in the doctrine of "original sin" -- NOT ONE OF US CAN CLAIM TO BE FREE FROM SELF-CENTEREDNESS! We often have the right intentions, but we more often lack the right spirit of follow-thru! And why does this happen so frequently! Most often, because we have not allowed enough SPACE FOR GRACE in our lives. That has been the perennial problem of good Christians -- they know what's right, but they can't achieve it because they have limited their SPACE FOR GRACE.

This concept was powerfully illustrated for me recently at a Pastors' Conference through a story about the life of Aunt Grace. "Aunt Grace - a widow of 20 years - finally admitted at age 84 that she was too old to manage the farm. So she willed her lovely, old Victorian house to her only remaining survivor, her nephew, named Sam. 200 acres. Her trust provided that Sam and his family would immediately take possession of the house. She would build an efficiency apartment out back by the garage where she could have her

privacy so that Sam and his wife, Laura, and their ten year old son, Jimmy, could take immediate control and run the house as if it were their own. The deal seemed a winner to both parties. Aunt Grace could live out her days on the farm in the comfort and knowledge that the family and support would be right here, near her at all times. Sam and family would take occupancy of the lovely home at no cost to themselves. And there would be the intuitive agreement that while Grace would honor the privacy of Sam's family, she nevertheless would be welcome to pop in at any time. She would always have a kind of gracious run of the house.

The new arrangement proved a special boon to ten-yr old, Jimmy. When Sam and Laura lived in town, Jimmy had to be a latch-key kid always coming home to an empty house because his parents worked til 5 o'clock. But now that they lived in Aunt Grace's house in the country, Jimmy would get off the school bus and would skip to the apartment. And there he would be virtually smothered by hugs from Aunt Grace. And she would put warm freshly, baked bread out for him every day. He loved her lilting laugh that seemed to make her portly tummy jiggle and rumble. He loved to hear her stories; he especially loved how she LISTENED to his stories as if he was the MOST IMPORTANT PERSON IN THE WORLD. Aunt Grace seemed to Jimmy to light up the whole place, esp. when she came into her old house that she had maintained so well for 50 years. She'd sit down at the piano and play all those old timely tunes that he had never heard ... and she would sing along. And even though that wasn't his kind of music, somehow it made him feel more solid and secure.

She'd eat Sunday dinners with the family and linger over apple pie talking recipes and canning with Laura. She'd pop into the kitchen with canned vegetables; she'd sit at night-time with coffee and talk with Sam. The more she was around - the more Jimmy sensed there was a difference between his parents and Aunt Grace. Sam and Laura's breakfast table was never the table of Aunt Grace out back. Laura too often listened to Jimmy as if she were waiting for him to stop talking so she could immediately begin to tell him about his need to wash his face, or to clean up his room, or to sit up and act his age at church next Sunday. Sam listened to Jimmy never looking at Jimmy's face but merely waiting for a break in conversation so that he could insert one of his pat pep talks about TRYING HARDER ... trying harder on homework ... or doing better on the ballfield. Jimmy just never seemed to feel o.k. with Sam and Laura -- they were always a bundle of "shoulds" and "gottas." "You gotta be better, Jimmy" "You oughta never do that!" "Try harder to be the best" Jimmy was never good enough for Sam and Laura - but he always felt he was the greatest for Aunt Grace.

Oh, Aunt Grace had lofty standards aplenty that she could lay on Jimmy. But Jimmy never felt she was breathing these standards all over him. Instead, she delighted him and gave him the space to be himself ... to make something of himself or even to fail. He would go and straighten up his room or make his bed in a minute if Aunt Grace even hinted at these things.

Well, as time went on - there seemed to be less SPACE FOR GRACE in the house. Laura ostensibly had so many "oughts" and "shoulds" to do -- the cleaning, the bills, the errands, the wash -- that she made it suddenly clear she didn't have SPACE ANY MORE FOR AUNT GRACE. Sam, the minute he got home from work, was out to the barn to tend to the feed or deal with the tractor that needed repair. He seemed to be forever signaling to Grace that even when she peeked into the kitchen ... that he really hoped she wouldn't come in and get in the way of his self-appointed progress.

The Aunt Grace whose ringing laughter had brought so much joy to Jimmy, whose stories use to grace the dinner table ... the Aunt Grace who used to sit and listen for what seemed to be hours to Jimmy's secrets in the privacy of his own room -- that Grace had become absent from her own house. She had gotten the message loud and clear -- SHE WAS NO LONGER WANTED IN THAT HOUSE. Now and then she'd pop into the kitchen to offer an awkward hello. But for the most part now, Aunt Grace stayed out back. There was no longer SPACE FOR GRACE. She stayed in her apartment, minding her own business - living in the deep sadness that she was no longer welcome in her own home ... the house that she had so graciously given away.

A year or two later as Grace became more feeble, and Jimmy was old enough to begin to understand some things, his parents no longer seemed busy, but ALWAYS nervous. Nervous at wondering what they would now do with Aunt Grace. Since they had been so good at shutting her out -- now they no longer knew even how to approach her. Now it was no longer just PHYSICAL Space for Grace -- now they had even lost touch with their emotional and spiritual Space for Grace. They had totally lost touch with that wonderful flow that had belonged to Grace. Though Jimmy couldn't put it neatly in words, he knew deep within his soul that Laura and Sam had crowded Grace out of her own house. Grace's music and her food and her delight and her laughter and her stories were no longer there. Forever gone ... forever shattered by Laura and Sam who only had time for themselves. Only an occasional (knock) on the door at the back of the house was heard ... a knock from Sam or Laura, but never an invitation to enter! No longer was there any SPACE FOR GRACE. The house that had been alive with warmth and wonder, with fresh bread and lilting laughter, with hugs and hopes and humor and holiness ... was now FILLED WITH disappointments and despair, with duties and demands, with no SPACE FOR GOD'S GRACE! So goes the story of Grace.

The challenge of our faith is not only to make space for Grace in this sanctuary - but to make space for Grace in our dining rooms, our living rooms, our corporate offices, and our classrooms. When there's SPACE FOR GRACE in our dwelling places, then like Jimmy, we don't have to be told how to behave ... we willingly live out the behavior of Grace. Grace enables us to do the divine imperatives. We don't have to be told to make our beds or wash our hands -- we simply know its' the Graceful Thing to do.

But when we no longer hear the lilt of Grace's laughter ... when we no longer feel her forgiving hugs and jiggling tummy ... when we no longer honor Jimmy's or Johnny's or Mary's or Sarah's stories as the most important thing we can hear that day - then there's no Space for Grace. And when there's no longer Space for Grace -- then we no longer live by Grace's principles ... by GRACEFUL RIGHTEOUSNESS.

When Jesus says, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" he is saying: FIRST YOU MUST TAKE A TOUR OF GRACE'S HOUSE BEFORE YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS WILL EXCEED THAT OF THE PHARISEES. Because if you have never toured Grace's house - you will never have heard the sound of her voice singing just for you ... or the smell of her bread baked just for you. But once you have toured the house that Grace built -- then you will have come to know the meaning and the purpose of Grace's life -- not one who merely demanded good behavior, but one who lived to love in order that we might behave like her. Yes - when you have toured the house that Grace built -- no longer is your righteousness a self-righteousness. Now your righteousness seeks to uplift all the others around you -- to care about little ones like Jimmy ... your righteousness seeks to care for the lost, the lonely, and the least among us.

Yes, as Pastor Michaels said last week - the problem with the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees -- of the Sams and Lauras of our world ... is that IT IS A SELF-SERVING RIGHTEOUSNESS. They do the right things only to serve themselves, not to save anyone else. Sam and Laura, had replaced their Space for Grace, with self-concern, self-worry, self-pity, and self-fulfillment. The concerns of self and status and stature and sophistication had become more important than the spirit of Grace. And when self leaves no space for Grace ... it is impossible to fulfill the lofty standards of love. THANKS BE TO GOD - THAT HE ALWAYS LEAVES PLENTY OF SPACE FOR US TO RECEIVE HIS GRACE!!

On this Feb. 11th - three days before Our Virture of Holy Valentines Day -- take time to tour Grace's House. If you and I want less anger and more love ... if you and I desire less lust and more trust in our daily affairs -- then we must SLOW DOWN ... AND make MORE SPACE FOR GRACE at our tables, in our lounges, and at our board rooms. Instead of first thinking of the "shoulds" and Oughttas" and "gottas" -- we must first take time for listening and laughing ... for hugging and holding ... for just telling our stories of joy and disappointment.

When we make that kind of SPACE FOR GRACE - then we won't hear an angry father or frustrated boss or preachy pastor saying: YOU GOTTA TRY HARDER TO BE A BETTER PERSON; YOU GOTTA BE A BETTER CHRISTIAN! Instead - we will reflect the Grace that we have experienced in this house - the love and laughter and jiggling belly of God's Grace. Then we will love others as we have been loved ... which is what it means to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

AMEN

EPIPHANY VI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
February 16, 1992
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"GO FOR THE GOLD!"

Thus says the Lord: Cursed is the man who trusts in his own flesh ... he is like a shrub in the desert. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord ... he is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream." Jer. 17:5f

Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; ... Luke 6:23

We've all heard the names now for the last seven days ... Krisit Yamaguchi, Bonnie Blair, Viktor Petrenko, Christopher Bowman, Kurt Browning, Paul Wylie, Donna Weinbrecht, Dan Jansen, Ray LeBlanc & Team Hockey USA, and the disappointing Cinderella team, Calla Urbansky and Rocky Marval. Many of us have dutifully watched these Americans and many other young athletes GO FOR THE GOLD since last Sunday in Albertville, France. It's so easy to get caught up in this OLYMPIC RUSH FOR THE GOLD, isn't it?

One thing is for certain for all the athletes: TO GO FOR THE GOLD, YOU CANNOT MERELY ASPIRE TO MEDIOCRE GOALS. You cannot be satisfied in "getting by" as just another good athlete. You cannot have a "Ho-Hum" attitude toward training and discipline. "TO GO FOR THE GOLD" you give it your all ... you shoot for the loftiest of athletic achievement ... you don't allow the defeats of yesterday to determine the possibilities for tomorrow's success. TO GO FOR THE GOLD is good for all of us to see ... because it reminds us that all great ideals, whether in sports, religion, or global affairs, are rarely achieved with half-hearted commitment. GOING FOR THE GOLD is not for the faithless and faint-hearted, but for those who have the unshakeable determination to sacrifice, and sacrifice, and sacrifice some more.

And so the 26th Olympics continue for the next six days ... and many of us will continue to observe and comment about those GOING FOR THE GOLD at Albertville. But there's another GOLD RUSH before our eyes today. It's another approach to GOING FOR THE GOLD with the same commitment and unshakeable faith. However, instead of seeking the glory and gold for ourselves ... the aim of those who GO FOR THIS GOLD give the glory to God while uplifting & serving the needs of others.

This kind of Olympic competition becomes the focus of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in the Sermons on the Mount and the Plain respectively - which is today's focus from Luke 6. Both sermons focus upon the same events -- upon those GOING FOR THE GOLD OF THE GOSPEL. Today's text uplifts Luke's discipline of the Beatitudes; I personally prefer Matthew :

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied;

Blessed are the poor in spirit (those who need God),
for theirs is the kingdom of God;
Blessed are those who mourn (show compassion), for
they shall be comforted; ...

In the Sermons on the Mount and Plain, Jesus offered his most aspiring followers THE DEEPEST DREAMS of discipleship ... the LOFTIEST PRINCIPLES of Christian leadership ... THE HIGHEST IDEALS OF FAITHFULNESS for anyone aspiring to the Gold of the Gospel! There can be no doubt about it -- the Sermon that follows in Luke 6 (to which we only have a snatch) is definitely the Olympic Ideal of Christianity! It's not a comfortable challenge, easily achievable by those who enter the sanctuary on Christmas and Easter. It's the tough stuff made for the decathlon disciple -- the one who seeks to exercise and sweat out his/her faith day after day after day.

And unlike the Olympic games in Albertville -- God does not only select a few "stand outs" to GO FOR THE GOLD OF THE GOSPEL. He calls all of us, day in and day out, TO GO FOR IT! In Holy Baptism, each of us gets the call to reach for the highest, the loftiest, and the greatest goal of the Gospel -- TO LIVE OUT GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS WITH ONE ANOTHER. That's the GOLD that you and I are going for today ... and hopefully, every day!

But how in the world can we possibly aspire to this kind of righteousness -- to this REAL GOLD OF THE GOSPEL ... to this righteousness of Christ?? How can we overcome the defeats of lustfulness, of broken promises & hate-filled relationships, of murderous anger? Possibly the answer is found in looking no further than the average Olympic athlete.

Olympic athletes from my perspective manifest two very basic and essential qualities that enable them TO GO FOR THE GOLD. First, they are blessed with God-given ability. And second, by using and using and using these natural abilities, these gifts become the instruments of determination that transform defeat into success.

And just like Olympic athletes, every Christian has been endowed with these same basic qualities from God. First and foremost, God has endowed each of us with the gift of his DIVINE GOODNESS AND POWER. That's what Holy Baptism is all about - the giving of the spirit and power of God. That's what Sunday School is all about - the reinforcing of those baptismal gifts! That's what confirmation and church is all about - the continual exercising of those baptismal gifts.

And the greatest thing that you and I are suppose to learn through baptism, SCS, catechism, and regular worship is that God has given us more than a Divine Rule Book ... more than all the right rules and regulations ... more than ten perfect commandments! God has given us his grace ... his spirit. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ,

you and I have been GIVEN THE GOLD -- the assurance of mercy & forgiveness in order that no defeat or setback in all creation will cause us to despair or be hopeless. That's why Jesus says in the sermon, "it was said of old, but I say unto you ... 'you have more than a rule book, you have my power and Spirit with you at all times.' You have been blessed with more than rules and regulations, you have my love written forever within your hearts and minds and wills.

And so like Olympic athletes (but often forgotten by them) we do not achieve God's highest goals because of our good works ... or through our never-ending practice ... or through our perfect knowledge. We achieve God's highest goals through HIS GIFT OF GOLD WON FOR US BY NONE OTHER THAN JESUS CHRIST, THE ULTIMATE OLYMPIAN OF ALL CREATION! Not only did Jesus Christ overcome the powers of anger, lust, egotism, arrogance, temptation, and all the other defeating powers of life, but he also overcame the ultimate defeat, death! And that same GIFT OF GOLD has been given to each of us! Through Jesus Christ, we already have received the highest tribute that any of us could be given - WE HAVE THE POWER OF GOD'S RECONCILING LOVE!

So like Olympic athletes - we all have the essential God-given gift! And secondly, such Olympic athletes succeed with these gifts because THEY USE THEM WITH THE DETERMINATION TO TRANSFORM DEFEAT INTO VICTORY! The might, the moves, the muscles, the meticulous timing, the methodical practice -- all these are necessary! But without the spirit that says that THIS GIFT can transform defeat into victory ... these athletes would never stand a chance of winning. Many of you will see that demonstrated next Sunday night. No matter how much we pastors methodically practice on Fridays, we will never win against the Lions ... BECAUSE WE DO NOT POSSESS THE ESSENTIAL GIFTS THAT TRANSFORM DEFEAT INTO VICTORY. As one member told me - we gifted to pray, not to play!

Or maybe that story is better told by the pair who became a custodial couple. They met each other in a home for the developmentally disabled. Intellectually, they simply did not have it! Culturally, they did not have it! Socio-economically, they did not have it! But what they did have was a deep love for each other and an uncanny ability to do cleaning. After they got married, the big question was: would they be able to survive without becoming wards of the state?

Well, like Olympic athletes, they possessed that spirit to use their God-given gifts to transform defeat into victory. They heard that a small church was looking for a part-time custodian. The church paid \$100.00/week. They discovered after two weeks - that by working hard together, they could do all the required work of the church in one day. The pastor found them dependable, efficient, and dedicated. So they asked him to recommend them to other small churches. Soon they had found four other small churches requiring the same work - one day a week for \$100. Within two months, they were earning \$26,000 a year. THEY POSSESSED THE ESSENTIAL

SPIRIT in which they used their God-given gifts to transform defeat into victory!

That's the spirit of GOING FOR THE GOLD expressed every day by thousands of faithful in this world. It's more than memorizing the ten commandments. It's more than having all the right doctrinal answers from the catechism. It's more than possessing a theological degree or pastoral collar. It's the willingness to recognize a God-given gift ... and then to have the spirit TO USE THAT GIFT IN ORDER TO TRANSFORM DEFEAT INTO VICTORY! There are thousands of moms & dads who use that gift and spirit every day of their lives in their homes, with their children, and in the hundreds of tasks that are part of their daily routine. They don't have the glory of being on television in Albertville, but they GO FOR THE GOLD by sharing the Gospel in their kitchens & family rooms ... by talking weekly to teaches & coaches ... by visiting the elderly or the dying in nursing homes ... by just being moms & dads, sisters and brothers who will not allow the symptoms of defeat in this world to have the final victory.

That's the underlying message of the Sermon on the Mount and Sermon on the Plain. Jesus reminds us that we live in a world that suffers daily from the symptoms of defeat: from anger, from lust, from broken promises, from only loving those who are "lovable ... who show worldly credibility," from a mentality which routinely feels justified in over-looking the least and the lost. There's not one of us who hasn't sometime experienced one of these symptoms of defeat. None of us scores perfect "6's" in our day to day routines.

But God has never said that GOING FOR THE GOLD demands perfect 6's from his disciples. He simply says: BE FAITHFUL TO WHAT I HAVE GIVEN YOU! Recognize that you have been given THE GOLD OF THE GOSPEL! You already possess the victorious treasure of life. Now possess that spirit which seeks to use the Gift of the Gospel to transform defeat into victory! Or as St. Paul said - "Present yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God ... not merely holy and acceptable to the applause and accolades of Albertville.

Where we see the defeat of hunger, homelessness, abuse or horrors of violence -- we offer the victorious remedy of the Gold of the Gospel. Sometimes that GOLD is food, many times its money; sometimes it's just a willingness to deal honestly with those possessed by the demons of anger and lust! But in and through it all, it's always a spirit of compassion and caretaking for the bruised, the broken and the fallen ... and it's always a power of mercy and forgiveness for the guilty and repentant. That's why the GOLD OF THE GOSPEL is never a MEDIOCRE GOAL - it's the ultimate crown of victory! By all means, it's not the crown of self-glory, it's the crowning glory of God! And that's why the people of God GO FOR THAT GOLD, BECAUSE THEY WILL NEVER SETTLE FOR ANY DEFEAT OF THE MERCIFUL LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST!!

AMEN.

EPIPHANY VI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
February 14, 1993 (Valentine's Day)
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"You're Mine! I'm Yours!
And That's That!"

"Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,
loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to
him, for that means life to you and length of days." Deut.
30:20 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make
one hair white or black. Let your word be "Yes, Yes," or "No,
No." anything more comes from the evil one. Matt. 5:37

Today is Holy Valentine's Day -- not exactly a major
festival of the church, but certainly a major festival of the
culture. I would speculate that more candy, cards, flowers,
sleepwear and jewelry are purchased on Valentine's Day than
any other day of the year. It's the American Mountaintop of
Mush! No matter what we've said to each other on Feb. 13th or
the 363 days before that ... today like magic the lyrics
change to "You're Mine and I'm Yours!"

Please don't get me wrong: we all need some special days
of renewed love & affection. It's not all bad to have a day
set aside for candy & kisses ... flowers & flirtations ...
jewelry & juicy greetings. Heightened awareness of love is
good for the soul and the society. But have you read any of
those published valentines in the newspaper?? Robert writes
to Donna: "You're the best thing that's ever come my way! I
love you so much. I hope the next ten months will be as great
as the first ten!" Here's a guy who thinks 10 months tells
the whole story! Tony says to Anna: You've made me the
happiest guy in the world since our honeymoon rafting trip. I
have always dreamed of rafting with someone like you; and now
I want nothing more than to raft down the river of life with
you forever!" Tony thinks true love is rafting down the
river; wait 'til the bills start coming. And Valerie says to
Andrew: "First of all, I love chocolates; second of all, I
love stuffed animals; and third of all, I love loving you!" I
sincerely hope that Andrew sees the pecking order of that love
- first chocolates, then stuffed animals, and lastly HIM.

And some people will go to any extreme just to have
someone tell them "You're Mine!" Possibly some of you
remember me telling you about Elliot Essman five years ago.
Elliot was a NY software computer expert who was 37 and twice
divorced. In addition to developing software, he also was a
whizz at "romantic writing." Having an entrepreneurial
spirit, he began to market "computerized love letters." For
\$35 a year, you could become a regular subscriber to Elliot's
"love-letter-a-month" club. In just a few months in 1988, he
already had nearly 400 monthly subscribers. By now he's
probably got thousands. Just think - once a month, he sends
each subscriber a letter oozing with sentimental affection.
The subscriber feels that psychologically "I'm Yours;" and
Elliot knows that "You're All Mine" to the tune of \$35/yr.

As this ploy illustrates, there are a lot of people out there who are just waiting for someone to say, "You're Mine!" so that they can quickly respond, "I'm Yours!" But we all know that this kind of Valentine's Day expression ONLY LASTS FOR A LITTLE WHILE.

God has higher expectations for those who claim His name. He wants his people to be followers of His Word -- a "Word" which when spoken, IS NOT JUST ANY OLD ROMANTIC WORD, BUT AN EVERLASTING PROMISE THAT CAN BE TRUSTED. When God says, "You're Mine!" there is absolutely no doubt about that promise! It is a word that can be trusted! It has been given to us in Holy Baptism and regularly reinforced through Holy Communion. It has been shown as a trustworthy word through shepherds and kings, through saints and samaritans, through lepers and the learned of old. And Jesus Christ came not only to say it, but to live it and die it to show us that God really means what he says when he says: "You're Mine and I'm Yours." This is not Valentine's Day sentimentality -- this is a love that can be trusted!

So then, God's question is: How can you and I come to the altar with our GIFTS OF LOVE still holding grudges & seething anger toward one another?? That's just not common sense -- to come to the altar of God "in love" while still holding hate and hostility to others of God's children. That simply is not being a person of "your Word" as God is a God of His Word. Some of us may think God is trying to lay a heavy guilt trip upon us through these higher standards of the Sermon on the Mount. That is simply not the case. He is merely saying: PEOPLE OF THE KINGDOM ARE PEOPLE OF THEIR WORD. When they say something, it is to be trusted ... and THAT'S THAT! When they say "Be mine" one day, they don't turn around the next day and say "Get lost!" When they say "You Are Mine today," they don't turn around tomorrow and commit adultery with their hands & eyes. When they say, "I love you," this year, they don't turn around next year and say, "I divorce you!" When they say "I promise," they don't have to swear on a stack of bibles or draft a complicated contract. So God keeps asking: How can people who claim my love turn right around and kill and maim each other with their WORDS?? God says, "IF YOU ARE MINE (of my kingdom), you will come to terms quickly and be done with hurtful grudges & anger!"

That reminds me of the argument of Mr. & Mrs. Merten of Mt. Clemens. MI. reported in Reader's Digest. They had begun an argument at a party and the spat continued as they were leaving. When they got into their car, the words were really flying. The area that they were driving through was not the best. But Merten's wife had really worked up a storm; she said a few choice words, and then shouted: "Stop the car right here and let me out!!" Merten pulled over and his wife got out. She looked around - then got back in. Looking sheepish, she said: "First, take me to a better neighborhood.!" They both broke up and that was the end of that!

Regretably, many times, unlike the Mertens, we don't come to terms quickly with our anger and disaster results. That was the case recently in Philadelphia where a man murdered another man simply because he cut in front of him on the freeway. The traffic had slowed and was funneling into one lane. The 1st man had waited for more than 15 minutes until he could begin to enter the flow of traffic. Just as he was about to do this, another car passed him on the shoulder and cut in front of him. As though that were not enough, the other driver laughed and made an obscene gesture as he passed by. It was too much to handle. When traffic stopped again because of congestion, the 1st man removed a gun from his glove compartment, got out of his car, walked to the side of the car of the man who taunted him, and shot him to death.

We've all known this same kind of anger when somewhat cuts in front of us in the midst of highway construction: IT CAN BE A VERY DESTRUCTIVE ANGER. This incident certainly makes clear that too often we are not a people of the Kingdom -- we do not live by the "words" that we profess in our churches, our clubs, our confessions, and our pledges of allegiance. And in the Sermon on the Mount, God uses some pretty heavy artillery himself to remind us "that we have fallen short of the glory and trust of His Word with our words."

Few of us may have killed with a gun, but most of us have murdered with our mouths. Most of us have never committed adultery in someone else's bed, but all of us have committed adultery with our eyes and hands and minds. For the majority of us, the marriage promises at the altar were an easy expression on our wedding day; but regretably, far too many people have found it too easy to break those promises too soon thereafter. Many of us have taken oaths and signed contracts and agreed to job descriptions and even surrendered to binding arbitration -- but few of us have lived faithfully to those oaths and contracts and binding legalities.

Today, God is again calling us to be a people of our WORD -- that when we make a promise, we will keep that promise. That when we tell him we will become his team of disciples -- that we will play the game by his playbook ... not imposing our own egocentric and adolescent demands to get everything to go our way - and if not, taking our marbles and going home.

To some of you - this whole matter may sound like a lot about nothing. But as a pastor, I can rarely make it thru a week without hearing about someone in the church who is ticked off because he/she is not getting his/her way (or enough attention) with this or that! And that would be o.k. if it stopped right there. But too often, then that person takes his/her anger and spreads it like poison through the whole body. And then as noted in today's text - that person stands at the altar with his/her gifts saying to God: "I am yours! I love you with heart, mind, soul and strength!!" Is it any wonder that John says: "Those who say "I love God," and hate their brothers & sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother & sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

The issue of today's gospel (and OT lesson where Moses urges us "to choose life" ... namely, the way of God) is not merely anger or adultery or divorce or oath-taking. The issue is: "Can your word and my word be trusted like God's word?" We all remember the so-called "Gentleman's Agreement" of days gone by ... where your word and your handshake were as good as gold. That's the standard of the Kingdom of God -- where "Yes" means "Yes" and "No" means "No," and we don't need a complicated contract in order to understand and trust one another.

Obviously - many of you are saying this standard will never work in our world. You are quite correct. The vision of the Kingdom of God is very idealistic. It is a place where one's word can be taken literally -- trusted, believed, and accepted without doubt. We all know there are fewer and fewer places in the world where that vision & standard are the basis of partnerships & relationships. But isn't that IDEAL something that we as Christians should be fighting for?!? Isn't that what makes us different from the rest of the world?!? Don't we have a standard that far exceeds the drug dealers and beauracracies of this world?!? Why have we Christians so easily succumbed to compromise & contracts ... legalities and law suits?!? Even here in the church our Stewardship program still has to use that "silly but necessary" thing called a PLEDGE CARD. It's an indication of a lack of trust. Because when a person becomes a member of this family of faith -- can't we just expect that person to be faithful and generous in time, talent & money!! Yes, that's the way it's supposed to be! But we all know we haven't quite reached that place yet -- in the church or the culture. We are still somewhat short of the standards of the kingdom -- where my word and your word can be trusted just as they are ... without any pledge cards or oaths or anything else. Is it any wonder that Lutherans emphasize grace & forgiveness so much?!?!

Yes, that's why it's so essential that we hear this Word of God from the Sermon on the Mount. Because it reminds us that when God says: "You're Mine! I'm Yours! And That's That!" -- he really means it ... his word can really be trusted! Is it any wonder that he wants us to live with each other by the same "word" and the same standard of trust?!?

AMEN.

EPIPHANY VI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
February 12, 1995
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"CHOICES OF THE HEART"

Jeremiah says: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make flesh their (ultimate) strength, ... Blessed are those whose trust is in the Lord. Jer. 17:5,7
The blessings and curses of the Beatitudes from Luke 6

Here we are, just two days away from the greatest outpouring of sentimentality of our culture -- and I already preached my sermon on LOVE two weeks ago. That being the case - maybe I should just encourage you to take one of the copies available in the narthex and let it go at that. Then I could truly say this was the shortest sermon ever given!

But God will not let me nor any of you get off that easy today! The lectionary texts may not focus on LOVE, but they do deal with CHOICES OF THE HEART. And when I use the word "heart," I use it in the biblical sense: **what is at the center of your life and mine.** When Pastor Michaels or I or anyone else asks: "Do you have Jesus in your heart?" we are really asking: IS CHRIST AT THE CENTER OF YOUR LIFE? Does everything you **say** and **do** and **give** have a connection with Christ's life?

Maybe that's why Valentine's Day uses a "heart." It is a day to remind ourselves of those who are at the CENTER OF OUR LIVES: **our spouses, our family, our close working associates, our intimate circle of friends, and hopefully, our church family.** Those are the VALENTINES of our lives -- the ones for whom a day cannot go by without thinking of them, without being with them, without sharing some treasure of creation with them (so it is that we buy candy & cards & flowers on Tuesday). The biblical concept of "**heart**" is that which faithfully remains at the center of our lives.

And what Jesus says today in the Sermon on the Plain (Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount) is that we can CENTER OUR LIVES **on curses or blessings.** The same truth is reflected by Jeremiah in the OT lesson: "*Cursed are those who trust in mere mortality and make their flesh their ultimate strength.*" Jeremiah lived in a culture that put human strength and prowess at the center of life. In Israel, the **choice** of the **hearts** was to make "physical power and human brute strength" the ultimate expression of life. In short, Jeremiah is saying that too often folks just can't get away from the bathroom mirror; he means that too many have given over their lives to a parched existence ... to looking in the mirror and being obsessed with strength and beauty and other things that last only a little while.

For that same reason, Luke says in the gospel: "Woe to those who center their lives on being rich ... or on being full ... or on laughing, i.e., making life only a good time ... or on equating life with popularity (being well spoken of). For once we **center our lives** on

popularity or wealth or self-satisfaction **we have revealed in our hearts that all we need is ourselves; we no longer need God to bless us.** And Jeremiah and Luke say that making **these choices of the heart** are really curses ... because they are all fleeting. *Popular one day; despised the next*, says Bill Clinton. *Rich one day, impoverished the next*, says Muhammed Ali. *Filled to the brim one day; empty the next*, says O. J Simpson.

In the Sermon on the Plain (or Sermon on the Mount), Jesus urges us to be GOOD VALENTINES ... **to choose to be Christ-like Hearts -- to center our lives on those things that will be everlasting!** And what are the choices of our faith that are everlasting? Is it the **liturgy** or the **expression of our piety in church?** Is the building or the furnishings of our churches the everlasting rock of faith? Do our current statements on sexuality or capital punishment or war & peace or aging -- are these the everlasting ethic of our hearts? Will our current racial attitudes remain the everlasting expression of our church and culture? Do we think that our current educational beliefs or degrees will stand the test of eternity? Our texts today speak very clearly: **if we center our lives on these temporary traditions we will certainly be cursed.**

Jesus urges something else: "Blessed are you when you are poor ... or poor in spirit." On one side, Jesus is saying there will always be a mission to the poor: that will be an everlasting CHOICE OF THE HEART of His Church ... to seek to minister and alleviate the conditions of poverty and injustice in this world. That may be cursed as a cause by the world, but it will always be the conviction of the heart of Christ! Likewise, Christ says: his beloved will always be "poor in spirit"--we will always need God's help and guidance. Those are the choices made by persons who **center** their hearts in Christ.

Then he goes on: "Blessed are you when you are hungry ... or when you hunger for righteousness." There is something very good about being forever hungry; a hungry person never takes the gifts of creation for granted. That's why Christians used to **fast** during Lent - to remind themselves of the goodness of God's gifts. Jesus urges his followers not only to know the reality of physical hunger, but also to strive for spiritual hunger: **to center our lives on his righteousness and his goodness.** By so doing, Jesus says we will never run the risk of becoming self-righteous or ungrateful. We all know that some of the most self-righteous and ungrateful people in the world are those who have never known a day of hunger! God deliver us from having such greedy hearts!

We don't have time today to review all the Beatitudes of this sermon. But each beatitude offers an EVERLASTING CENTER FOR OUR LIVES. The Beatitudes are the principal **Choices of the Heart for Christians.** Because they celebrate the new day, the new life, the new blessing of Christ rather than the old curse of Adam. We come around this table not to share a cup of woe but to share the bread & cup of blessing! **There is no greater meal or hunger to be satisfied!** We gather in this place to receive the

VERY HEART OF GOD - the assurance that we are saved by his grace, not by our own goodness. So, that's the greatest CHOICE OF THE HEART - to glorify God's way above the principalities and powers of temporal society. For the way of God's heart always bears GOOD FRUIT.

How tragic that so many in our world today would rather choose to curse than to bless life. In fact, Bishop Chilstrom in meeting with the pastors on Friday said that he is currently drafting an article entitled: "**By their FAULTS you shall know them!**" That is the way the world has chosen to show its heart -- by pointing out somebody's faults rather than their fruits. A man spends a lifetime dedicating his gynecological practice to 35 thousand deliveries, and what is uplifted about his life vocation? That he is now known for performing a small number of mandatory abortions! "**By his faults you shall know him!**" A person seeks to be a public servant and responsible civic leader today and what's the first thing that we hear about her? That she used dope twice in college, had trouble with her high school principal when she was 15, and played spin the bottle with the neighbor boys when she was 12! "**By her faults you shall truly know her!**" Our national church has now done two comprehensive studies on Human Sexuality, yet when these studies reached the congregations the only thing that we heard about their scholarly focus was "they went too easy on gays." "**By the faults you shall know the truth!**" How is it **that in this great country** we have surrendered our hearts and minds and soul to the mentality of the media? And then we wonder why we feel so bad?! We have CHOSEN THE BEAT of the sound bite rather than the PULSE OF CHRIST'S EVERLASTING LOVE! And we all know what that choice really means! **It means we have centered our lives on cursing rather than blessing one another!**

Well, woe to those who have made the *Blade* or any other daily news the Bible of their lives. They have centered their lives on bad news! Is it any wonder we have so much depression and despair in this world.

There is a much better CHOICE OF THE HEART. It is the blessing of receiving forgiveness and grace when what I really deserve is to be cursed. But that is the privilege of BEING CHOSEN BY THE HEART OF CHRIST: we always receive Good News, not Bad News! Yet, it's not only a privilege. Jesus says, "Go and Do likewise!" To be so centered in the heart of Christ is both a privilege and responsibility of blessing others with the same fruit that we have received - the everlasting love of God. That's the Good News which God asks you and me not only to choose, but to offer daily to this world -- **so that the world might know us by our fruits rather than by our faults.**

Amen.