

Trinity XVII

Redeemer Lutheran Church - Milwaukee

October 3, 1971 WORLD WIDE COMMUNION

Text: Ephesians 4:1-6

Pastor Martyn

"OUR FAMILY TIE"

. . . There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God . . .

"The ushers had no bulletins.

The ushers had two pieces of rope per two people. We sat two by two, tied to one another. Tied by foot and tied by hand. United, bound, joined by hand and foot.

Two by two by two by two we sat in every pew. As one walked the other walked. As one knelt the other knelt.

We were conscious of every motion. There was always another in the same act. Nothing was singular or automatic.

I went to the communion table. We both went. No one could go alone. Together we confessed, ate, drank, walked, knelt, stood, sang, and prayed.

The pile of rope beside the ushers was a sign of communal living.

Some of the members debated the technique. Some had nothing to say. For some there was nothing left to say. It is doubtful that anyone has forgotten that hour.

The rope hangs over my desk. The man to whom I was tied is on my mind."\*\*

\*\*"Tied" from Uncovered Feelings by Herbert Brokering

As I thought about today's Epistle text especially in light of the worldwide significance of today's Communion celebration, I couldn't avoid this introductory poem by Herbert Brokering. For me, this poem captures the essence of the message and mission being proclaimed in the Lord's Supper. For as we share in

this common meal, we witness to our tie with Christ, with each other, and with all similarly committed persons throughout the world.

Needless to say, if I had requested the ushers to tie you by hand and foot this morning, I would fast lose my tie with this congregation. I would be the first to admit that the circumstances described in this poem are rather gimmicky.

But I doubt very much that Mr. Brokering intended his poem to be implemented on Sunday mornings--I doubt very much that he wrote this poem as cookbook-cure for Christian community. His intent, more likely, was to express in a different way what Paul was communicating to the Ephesians--that we are one body--the Christian Church, motivated by one Spirit and called to one hope which is found in one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. That is, Brokering is saying that this oneness--our unity--our common tie to Christ and each other is found and felt as we encounter and share the Lord's presence here and out there. We claim we encounter His presence most dramatically thru Holy Communion.

How can we make this claim: How does this Eucharistic Meal - this Holy Communion - this Lord's Supper clearly witness to Christian unity in here and out there--to our oneness throughout the World?

I think we can only grasp this reality as we see and share the various levels or feelings experienced in Holy Communion. For, the Lord's Supper is more than a pious walk to an altar rail--it is more than the digestion of a wafer and wine--it is more than the hour and a quarter spent in fellowship. The celebration of the Eucharist is the Christian drama of a bondage with Christ, motivating you and me to feel conflict, joy, and commitment of our tie to Christ. We have the opportunity to experience these three feelings in the Sacrament before us.

First this Sacrament of life--this Lord's Supper, much more than any church supper, makes us vividly aware of a conflict - the conflict that we have with Christ.

For we are constantly trying to cut ourselves away from our tie with him. We seek to take on the World alone and thereby sever ourselves from Christ and each other.

Our divisions within Christ's Church--our slanderous insults toward the pre-Reformation Church--our racial bigotry--our destructive wars--our exploitation of each other in and out of marriage, in business, in law, in politics--these all witness to our conflict with Christ.

But Christ's Eucharistic drama does not have its climax in this scene of guilt and indifference. For especially today as we share Christ's drama with His universal Church, we become keenly sensitive to our division--and in our confession of the division lurking here and everywhere, we potentially open ourselves to unity--to a reunited tie with Christ and all His people--to the one body that Paul proclaims us to be!

So, our drama moves from the pew to the altar. We are no longer experiencing feelings of guilt--and yet at the altar, are we looking so sad? So remorseful? So despairing? Does our reunited tie with Christ give us no greater joy than a pious scowl?

The other evening one of our parents was commenting that her son had lost all interest in the worship of the Church. Obviously, there could be many reasons for this state of affairs. In fact, we might just pass it off by saying that most kids go through this stage. But, WHY? Could it possibly be that young people don't feel a sense of joy and ecstasy in worship? Could it be that they feel, largely from observing us, that worship is just another weekly routine rather than an action of joy and praise and thanks as the word liturgy itself means? Is our piety so sedate, sour, and so phistacted, that we have actually blocked young people from experiencing any joy in it?

These questions deserve consideration. If for no other reason than to remind us that, when we share Christ's presence, especially here at the altar, we

should partake of his life joyfully. Just think for a moment about the mood that surrounds a family reunion--a marriage feast--or some other family celebration. These are not occasions for gloomy, guilty despair--they are renewing--yes, redeeming moments of joy. Should we not also convey this feeling as we are reunited with Christ and each other at His banquet table?

Thirdly, our participation in the drama of His life does not find its fulfillment--its full oneness at the table--for we have not fully shared His real presence until we have left His banquet hall and sought to bind up the broken ties in our own lives--in the lives of people around us--in the broken lives that we encounter in this world.

As we leave the Lord's table we are feeling a sense of urgency. We're like a child who has just discovered five new fingers--like a couple who have just been pronounced husband and wife-- like a cancer patient who has just been told that the malignancy is arrested.

In each of these situations, the persons involved are feeling the urgency of a new mission--a new commitment for their lives. And so as we leave this table we feel the urgency of a new mission--a new commitment for our lives. We feel this because in sharing Christ's presence, we have come to recognize and accept the real potential of life. That is, in the moment of forgiveness, we again see clearly our human worth and wholeness--we see that we are worth much to Christ and each other--we recognize our freedom again to forgive, to love, to serve Him and each other, because we are no longer tied down--TIED DOWN to a bag of guilt.

And so because our human needs have been met, we are free to recognize and respond to human needs around and beyond us--we feel driven to bind up the broken ties in our families--between friends - between diverse Christian brothers and sisters - between the persons whom we have cut off from our life.

Christ's Eucharistic drama has taken us from the conflict of separation to forgiving joy to a new mission, all of these offering us a real hope for

Christian unity without the need for uniformity.

The Worldwide Communion that we celebrate today proclaims to each of us that we need not resort to any gimmick to realize our hope for unity. We are all welcome at the Lord's table. And although our one body will never cease to suffer from conflict, the separating diseases that infect its various members, we nevertheless are called to confess these separations--called to die a little to ourselves--to share in Christ's sacrifice - so that we will be able to share a resurrected joy and new mission.

Today we are tied with millions who are sharing a gift from God. We share a common meal which proclaims the same forgiveness to each of us. And in this, we find ourselves as many members of one body--not uniform, but motivated by the same Spirit, and called to envision one hope which is focused in one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father.

He is above all and through all and in all because He came among us as a man, born human so that we could know him and have a way to understand his will and his love for us.

A man, as common-ordinary as bread who knew suffering and for us spilled his own blood like wine; who gave himself to us on a common cross and now gives himself to us in common bread and wine to tell us he wants us and accepts us even on our common days and in our unexalted, separation and brokenness.

That man to who we are tied is on our minds--and his presence is in our lives--

So--lift up your hearts--

Yes, lift them up unto the Lord.

And let us give thanks unto the Lord our God.

For it is meet and right so to do!!! Amen.

ST. MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS  
Lutheran Church of the Master - Troy  
September 29, 1974

"THE EXORCIST REVISITED"

"Nevertheless, what you should rejoice over is not that the spirits submit to you, but that your names are enrolled in heaven." LK 10:20

Martin Luther, in one of his lighter moments, stated: "When I go to bed, the Devil is always waiting for me. When he begins to plague me, I give him this answer:

"Devil, I must sleep. That's God's command, 'Work by day, Sleep by night.' So go away."

If that doesn't work and he brings out a catalog of sins, I say,

"Yes old fellow, I know about it. And I know some more that you've overlooked. Here are a few extra. Put them down."

If he still won't quit and presses me hard and accuses me as a sinner, I scorn him and say:

"St. Satan, pray for me. Of course you have never done anything wrong in your life. You alone are holy. God to God and get grace for yourself. If you want to get me all straightened out, I say, Physician, heal thyself."

Probably Luther wrote this after an evening at the pub. I think it's good practical advice when someone is faulting you or faulting someone you know. Simply respond: "Physician, heal thyself."

Obviously, Luther had a rather superstitious view of the devil. Today, St. Michael and All Angels Day, is not intended as a throw-back to superstition or a time for making a brief excursion into the realm of the occult.

Its intention is not to persuade the enlightened modern that the devil is a real person. It is not seeking to perpetuate a mediaeval mindset.

But it's aim nevertheless pushes us into the devil's ~~ring~~<sup>arena</sup> -- we are to come away from this day feeling that we have had a serious wrestle with the devil.

Isn't it strange that for a long time men have denied that there is a kingdom of evil. The modern mind has sought to negate the fact that there are forces of evil at work tempting, trying, seducing, and goading us into sin. Not long ago anyone who believed in the occult was considered a real dummy.

Yet when the pulpit fell silent, serious secularists took pen in hand. Men like Camus and William Golding. If you were to ask them, "Have you seen the devil?" they would answer, "I have."

What would you say? My answer would be "yes" and "no." I would definitely say "no" to the type of devil portrayed in the movie - "The Exorcist."

When Sue and I left that movie, we were by no means convinced of the medieval devil concept that was grotesquely pictured. It was great hollywood trickery -- it even started a fad of exorcism. But basically, it was a box-office variety devil. Something that would sell to a gullible, bored public but hardly be worth the price.

On the other hand, I have seen the devil in some real life situations. I have known young adults who have intentionally exposed their minds and bodies to great drug abuses SIMPLY for a kick. If apathy is the root of this sickness, then I definitely see apathy as the devil.

I have also seen the devil in many a person who rationalizes corruption and immorality in politicians and business by simply saying: "Well, everyone else is doing it." Such bandwagon justification of one's favorite politician, businessman, or even churchman is a form of devil worship.

Yes, I have also seen the devil in a man who is father of five and yet daily overlooks their needs in order to fulfill his own personal craving for his mistress. I have also seen the devil when children simply defy their parents or authorities simply because they think it's cute or because everybody else is doing it.

Through another pastor brother, I have seen the evidence of the devil being in a place in the early morning hours when that pastors phone rang and a frightened woman's voice asked him to protect her against her drunken, enraged husband. When the pastor got there, the husband was gone. But the house bore mute evidence of the devil's fury. He had kicked out the windows of the French doors, beaten his wife, and terrified the children. There was madness in that house which was demonic.

Needless to further say, I have seen the devil and so have each of you. He is experienced relationally - between people. We have all seen that power of evil which tears us from God, his will, and each other. We have all known the terror of being caught in the demonic grip -- trapped by evil, by deception, by anger, by slander, by lustful desires. We all know the struggle.

Even a young child has experienced this struggle when tempted to cheat or lie. Which one of us can say he needs no EXORCIST.

Thank God for his power in Christ. For we have received his power of exorcism -- NOT ONLY PRIESTS OR PASTORS, but each of us. The seventy disciples returned. They had gone out with the power of God -- and they returned having experienced the results of that power. They had been victorious over some demons.

In /t he allegorical revelation of John, St. Michael (God's angel or messenger) defeats and casts out the demonic element. The message is simple - there's no room for evil in God's kingdom.



So what's the point of St. Michael and All Angels Day? Simply, God's power is ultimate - he will win the final victory over evil. And how do we know this? Christ has already signaled the victory in his triumph over death. He offers this same reality to all who trust in him and his way. Evil may stalk the land - but it's tenure is limited.

Obviously, we must guard against overoptimism and triumphalism -- that is, announcing that we've got it made. The movie "Time To Run" hedges dangerously on this triumphalism. It ends leaving one with the impression that the struggle has ended -- never again to be a problem. Obviously, the answer is Christ and his way, but that does not eliminate the struggle nor the temptation to re-up with the evil forces.

The disciples had not won the world - a few sick had been healed - a few demons exorcised - a few converts to the faith, but the struggle would continue. The wrestling match had not ended - and did not during their lifetime.

So Jesus warns these followers AND US -- do not get wildly ecstatic just because my power of love has been victorious over a small sampling of evil. Your work has only begun. So get your heads on straight and simply rejoice in the fact that you can be assured of this same power and relationship as long as you stick with me.

*Jesus cautions his disciples against abusing his power*  
~~because~~ evil in its perversness can turn a holy thing like evangelism into head hunting, scalping, and even unchristian proselytizing. We've all experienced religious enthusiasts who are caught up in this devilish kind of witness. Jesus says: Have no part of that - don't get ecstatic over numbers <sup>of converts</sup> or your deeds - just rejoice in having a relationship with me.

In receiving new members today, Jesus says to the Master: Big deal - you've got a few more in the faith - don't think the struggle has ended.

<sup>do</sup> But <sup>now</sup> rejoice in having a few more in relationship to me - for you have that many more to contend against the forces of evil. Yes, rejoice in the fact that these NOW as ALWAYS have the opportunity with each of you to be enrolled with me forever.

For Christ's sake, let's continue to rejoice NOT IN NUMBERS, but in sharing the promise of his power over evil. After all, his power of love is the only ultimate thing to get ecstatic about!

Amen.

HOLY CROSS SUNDAY

Luth Church of the Master, Troy  
Sept. 14, 1975 (Rally Sunday)

"THE CROSSROAD OF LIFE AND DEATH"

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

A sixpointed star. A crescent moon.  
A lotus. A brilliant sun. All these symbols of other religions suggest beauty and light. The symbol of Christianity is an instrument of death. And yet, it is the ~~crossroad~~ *signpost* to new life.

What a paradox - the cross. It's meaning is full of opposites. As our text states, it is folly to those who do not believe - it is salvation to the believer.

It is death - and yet it is victory. It stands for the best - and yet the worst of men. It represents the end - and yet a new beginning.

It has elicited laughter and humiliation - and yet even greater awe and reverence. It is often draped with despair - yet more often unveiled brilliantly above tree-tops and towers.

What a paradox - the cross. Yes - what a paradox, especially today. A symbol which is so central to faith, and yet worn by millions simply as a glittering necklace - available at Saks Fifth Avenue from \$50 - \$150 dollars retail.

From a wooden tree - to a stamped out hunk of 14 karat gold - what a paradox - the cross. Much as it was 2,000 years ago, the cross still represents the best and worst of mankind.

In Christ, we have the best of the cross - sacrifice, obedience, and discipline. In many around him the worst of the cross - murder, disobedience, and lack of discipline. The cross - the crossroad of life and death - symbolizing

the best and worst of mankind. Let's look more closely at that comparison and contrast.

*at that <sup>paradox</sup> move carefully.*

Jesus needn't have died. He could have followed the advice of friends like Peter and avoided the showdown. Instead, he saw his Father's plan for him requiring the choice of sacrifice. So in Christ, we see that the cross stands for best in man - his willingness to sacrifice. *choosing*

But the cross also shows us the worst of man - for around that cross were hundreds unwilling to sacrifice their old ways. They clung to their rights and property - both Romans and Jews. Surely this Jesus would not lay any claim on their lives. Only one way to deal with him - murder him.

And so - we too must ask ourselves - of what significance is the cross in our lives? Does it bring out our best, or our worst? Do we respond to the cross BY OFFERING OUR TIME & RESOURCES WILLINGLY. Or does it bring out our worst? Do we find ourselves begrudging life-- putting others down - constructing crosses for others to die on?

Yes, what a paradox to be followers of the cross. But thank God - in Christ we see which side we're to be on. So let's continue to offer our best - by learning to live ~~feeling~~ *in* the pinch of sacrifice. *Way of life, not death.*

The cross - the symbol of man's best & worst. Jesus prayed, "Not my will, but thine." Can we possibly think those were easy words?? If anyone thinks they were, then he has made a puppet out of Christ. OBEDIENCE IS NEVER EASY. It's contrary to my desires - and it was contrary to Jesus' desires. At 33, I'm certain Jesus didn't want to die - but faith demanded obedience.

*The obedient life*

The cross shows us the best of man ~~A~~ but also the worst. For hundreds around that cross were DISOBEYING God's plan for them. No way

would they follow this man who fell so short of being a SUPER KING. Yes, how often even around that cross we see the worst DISOBEDIENCE of man. We see that disobedience in petty disputes -- in theological differences -- in pastoral imperfection as well as congregational slander. That's not even to name the millions in this world WHO WEAR THE CROSS but are totally disobedient to what it stands for.

Yes - what a paradox to be Christians claiming the cross. For each of us knows that he/she has been on both the best and worst sides of obedience. But thank God - he continues to offer us THE BEST SIDE by forgiving our disobedience.

Now - what will our response be for this offering of his love? Continued disobedience -- or renewed obedience. God has already shown us which way to choose.

Finally - the cross - the symbol of man's best and worst. While life was oozing out of his body, Jesus could still say: "Father, forgive them." What discipline! Surely, the cross could give us no better REPRESENTATION of the best of man.

But that same cross also shows us man's worst. For around it we hear the taunts of men - "if you're the son of God, then come down off the cross." Even as we receive the most disciplined gift man could get - the forgiveness of God, we are confronted with the worst that man can offer - the undisciplined life of billigerancy-- of slander -- of slobbering insults. Yes, around that cross we share the height and the depth of mankind.

Yes, what a paradox to gather at the foot of the cross -- for in its shadow, we receive life and death. Life in disciplined forgiveness; death in jeering insult and defamation of character.

And so, what has the cross done for us? Have

MORE SACRIFICIAL  
MORE OBEDIENT

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we become MORE DISCIPLINED GIVERS OF LIFE by offering what Christ offered. Or like a crazy mob, do we offer the undisciplined lifestyle of immoral, billigerant bigoted crowd?

<sup>The</sup>  
Again - God has shown us the best of man, and even offered us the best gift man could receive - the discipline of his love from a man named Jesus on the cross.

For some - to follow his example seems to be folly. They see it as weakness -- as a band-aid operation for society.

But for us - we see the way of the cross as the crossroad TO ACTIVATING God's power. For the cross is the way of sacrifice, obedience, and discipline -- hardly traits of weakness. Hardly a band-aid operation for society. More accurately, the power of God - the only power which will ultimately save society from destroying itself.

Thank God - he has shown us THE BEST WE CAN OFFER in the name of the cross of Christ.

Amen

PENTECOST XVII  
World Wide Communion Sunday  
October 3, 1976

"OUT OF NEUTRAL"

"My brothers, what use is it for a man to say he has faith when he does nothing to show it? Can that faith save him??" James 2:14

To James' last question, I feel compelled to answer "yes." We are saved by God's grace through faith. But salvation is not the key issue for James; rather, his concern deals with Christian piety and integrity. James is dealing with the way we live out our faith while still on earth.

So unlike Martin Luther, we cannot simply write James off. His letter is more than a straw epistle. ~~And I'm especially grateful to another pastor for a metaphor that gives greater clarity to this lesson.~~

As most of you know, I was born just after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. So my remembrances of WWII are very dim -- I don't remember the war bonds, the victory gardens, the blue and gold stars on the banners in front windows, the fireside chats, the rousing speeches, nor the OPA - the Office of Price Administration and Civilian Supply.

Some of you I'm sure remember the OPA and its main task -- the job of rationing. Rationing is something I've only heard about. But I'm told that most people complained about it -- even though it was quite fairly administered.

~~But~~ I'm also told that some people reacted to rationing by hoarding, stock piling and even buying the product at 50 times its price in the black market. Others reacted to rationing by merely giving up -- by quitting!

Pastor Norm Lucas, a fellow Lutheran clergyman, has shared the story of such a chap... a quitter.

This chap owned a 1940 Buick - almost a new car then. He had been allocated a class "A" gasoline

ration book. I'm told that class A books gave just enough gasoline to get around town -- but not enough for trips. So this chap applied for a class B book -- which were reserved for employees in essential industries.

Well, he was turned down. And instead of using his A book, he put his Buick up on blocks. That was early in 1942. And it sat there in his garage until rationing was lifted -- some four years later. "If he couldn't drive it as much as he wanted to, by jingo, he wasn't gonna drive it at all."

But every Sunday afternoon he'd go out to the garage, climb in the Buick, start her up, and let her run for five minutes. "Just to keep her in shape" he said. After warming it up, he'd cut the engine, give the accelerator two squirts, and let her sit 'til next Sunday.

This went on for four years. And for four years that Buick never moved an inch. It was all gassed up, warmed up, and revved up -- but it never went any place.

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As James look around at his contemporaries, he saw things pretty much the way I've just described this chap and his 1940 Buick,

His contemporary Christians had put their faith up on pillars of conformity, smugness, pride, and the rest -- but there she sat. Faith sat up in the air -- not touching the surface of life -- lifted above the dirt of reality -- out of contact with things as they really were.

People came out to the garage regularly -- to the worship sanctuary -- prayer day after prayer day they warmed up their religious engines for an hour or so-- and then that was that. Turn of the ignition of faith, and go back home to life as usual.

Is it any wonder that James asked --"my brothers, what use is it for a man to say that he has faith when he does nothing to show it?" You see -- it

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was not an issue of salvation -- but one of Christian integrity. James' question is for all ages and centuries. He's asking: Is Christian faith a 1940 Buick blocked up here in the garage of a church, revved up regularly every Sunday, and switched off when the acolyte puts out the candles?? Switched off and left here until next Sunday, same time, same place?

Or put more simply - is our faith OUT OF NEUTRAL? James is contending that a living faith is more than a smooth running engine with lots of horsepower.

~~But he is not~~ *James is not* belittling the piety of worship. But he is saying that worship must be like a service station. It is simply the place that we are gassed up to live the faith. Worship is simply the pit stop, not the display room.

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As we commune in concert with the world of Christians today -- it is good to consider James and his epistle. For we must ask ourselves -- how actively has our communion been expressed beyond this weekly pit stop.

Is faith something we keep in neutral up on blocks in this place -- or do we put it in gear as we leave here??

How have we responded to the life we've been given -- to the community that we are a part of -- to the income that we receive -- to the forgiveness that God has offered? Do we realize that all of these represent God's grace?

God has not rationed these out to us -- we have been blessed with great abundance. So like James, we must ask ourselves: How have we responded? By rationing back to God and others; or by giving generously as we have received.

Why do we gather with millions around this table today?? Are we doing it simply because it's tradition? Simply because this is a showplace of our piety??

God forbid! We're doing it because Jesus of Nazareth did more than worship or talk about love. He acted out his faith. He sacrificed himself so that we might be convinced that God is trustworthy. He put faith into gear.

That's why we gather around the table again. To be filled with Christ-like energy -- so that we can leave here and give more than a lot of hot air. Yes - we have been saved by grace through faith. And in gratitude, that means we put faith into gear every minute of life.

You ask - how can I do that. Let me give just one suggestion. Put your fingers on your pulse. Count your pulse for the next 5 or 10 seconds. If your pulse is near normal, you'll get around 70 counts in a minute.

Well, every time your pulse and mine beats a beat, one more person dies of starvation. That's right -- 70 people every minute -- 4,200 every hour. That's the whole city of Troy dead in 15 hours.

Earlier - you saw the Master's people who will walk for hunger. I pray that before you leave today, each of you will be on some's sponsor sheet. For that will be just one small way that you will live your faith -- and that's what I believe each of you has come here to do.

God bless you in doing it after you leave.

AMEN

PE<sup>T</sup>TECOST XVII

Luth Church of the Master, Troy

Sept. 25, 1977

"THE SEARCH GOES ON"

"... I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine respectable people who do not need to repent."

There's an old saying: "You can judge a man by the company he keeps." Many times this is and has been a wise proverb. But when applied to Jesus, he was in trouble. Because Jesus not only welcomed sinners, but enjoyed eating meals with them. So it was that many people were upset with him -- it's no wonder they were always charging him with immorality. He just didn't hang around with a very respectable crowd.

Well, Jesus was tired of these trumped up charges. It was time to set things straight - so he told a few stories (about a lost sheep, a lost coin, & a lost son). Everyone could identify with these parables. Of course-- they too would be pleased when the sheep was found - the coin found - the son no longer lost.

But many of these people were too dense to see that this was the reason Jesus associated with the outcasts and sinners. Because his insatiable mission was to bring these people back into the supportive care of God. So it was that there was more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents - than 99 self-righteous persons who are on such an egotistic cloud that they can't see their own rebellion against God.

What a message for us in a day like our own. So contrary to everything else in our world, what this parable says is that ONE DOES COUNT!! In each case only ONE was lost -- and in each case, the spotlight of love searched out the one -- God's love focuses upon that ONE which is lost. The search goes on -- FOREVER.

In talking to his disciples, Jesus says if God notices a sparrow -- then how much more he notices a lost human being. Man has often looked down on sparrows - the sparrow has the lowest rank of our feathered friends. Yet in early days they were used for food. They would crowd them together on a stick, and roast them like marshmallows.

They would be dipped in a sauce, and the vendors would peddle them in the marketplace.

Today, many of us put out birdfeeders -- and we'd prefer other species than the sparrow to eat from them. We often see the sparrow as a nuisance. So Jesus holds up the sparrow -- and he says, if God notices it, then how much the more he notices your needs and mine.

Jesus' whole ministry was marked by giving attention to people who thought they didn't count. And when they realized that they were loved and counted, they began to be what they were intended to be. In the presence of sinners, Jesus dreamed of them as saints. Jesus was the first man to promote the HUMAN POTENTIAL MOVEMENT. Jesus knew that love always makes a person feel useful. His aim was to love first - so that secondly EVERY MAN MIGHT FEEL USEFUL -- to do God's thing on earth.

God wants every person to KNOW he/she is loved. Because once we know we are loved -- then we can fulfill that purpose of love in our own lives.

Well - if this is the case - then why are people lost to God's love???

We need look no further than the parables before us. Each parable gives us a different clue as to how humanity is lost to God -- and often to each other.

In the case of the sheep - he just wandered away. A farmer once said: Sheep nibble themselves lost. They keep their heads down and just wander from one green tuft to another. - Going through a hole in the fence, they just keep going.

Humanity is often like that sheep. They keep their eyes on work and pleasure alone -- not taking the time to look up and get their bearings straight. Then one day -- usually just before death -- we wake up and discover that we have lost touch with God. Yes, many people are wandering in the wilderness, and don't even know it.

In the case of the coin, it was simply lost by carelessness -- ~~careless~~-ness by the one who was supposed to be responsible. The church has often let people slip through her fingers because she was not concerned enough about the needs of people. Last year at the end of the LIFE WITH GOD seminar - I asked each participant to give me 3 names for this year's seminar. There were 25 graduates of the seminar -- that would have made 75 potential names. I received about a total of 20 names. You see - that's pure carelessness -- just not caring enough about the lost sheep -- letting them slip right through our fingers.

In the case of the lost son, he deliberately chose to pack his bags and leave home. He was hell-bent to have a good time, and nobody was going to stop him. This was outright rebellion. Regrettable - I'm afraid a lot of people feel this way about their Father's love today -- they could care less.

But God is the Loser. And he does not take the loss casually. In all the parables - note how aggressive the Loser is to find the lost ones. The shepherd, ~~AND woman~~ **search** until the lost one is found. The father painfully & prayerfully awaits word of his headstrong son. God does not want to see any man abandon his GOD-GIVEN POTENTIAL.

It is this task that he gives to his church -- to be his spotlight -- to search out his lost -- not in judgment, but in love. Forgiveness was always offered freely without any strings attached. And after a person experienced God's love -- then he wanted them to feel useful -- to become servants - disciples - members of his body.

That is why we baptize first -- to first show God's loving forgiveness. And then we pray that because of this love -- that this child and his family will ~~become~~ **CONTINUE** a useful ~~instruments~~ **ments** of God's love.

That is our reason for being God's church.

We are called to be the lighthouse for the lost -- always radiating a ray of accepting love. Without that purpose - we become an exclusive club -- a self-congratulating society of the saved.

Pastor Nelson Trout of the ALC offers a gem of an illustration in this regard. On a dangerous seacoast, where shipwrecks often occurred -- there was a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a little hut, and there was only one boat -- but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea. They gave little thought for themselves - they went out day and night in search of the lost.

Many lives were saved by this little station -- in fact, so many that it became very famous. Some of those who had been saved, and others from surrounding communities, wanted to become associated with this station and give of their time and money for the support of its work. And so the little lifesaving station grew.

And as it grew, some of the members became unhappy that the building was so poor and crude. They wanted to erect a more comfortable place. So they purchased classy furniture and erected a **spacious** complex. It was decorated exquisitely, and looked more like a country club than a lifesaving station. A large liturgical boat was hung in the center of the room, around which initiations were conducted.

About this time, a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews (no longer volunteers) brought in loads of dirty, cold, wet people. There were whites, yellows, and blacks among them. The club really got messed up.

So the property committee built quarters outside the main building where victims were advised to clean up before entering. At the next meeting of the life saving society, there was a split in the membership. Many wanted to stop the lifesaving activities because they got in the way of the normal social life of the club. **Others** pointed out that the society had **drifted** away from the very purpose for which they existed--

to save lives of shipwrecked people. A vote was taken -- those who wanted to save lives were voted down -- they were told if they wanted to continue saving lives -- they should build their own place down the coastline.

And so they did. And as the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. History continues to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast today, you will find many exclusive clubs along the shoreline. Shipwrecks are still frequent, but most of the people drown.

— God deliver us from losing sight of our purpose -- to search for the lost.

AMEN  
—

PENTECOST XVII  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
September 18, 1983  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"DOES ONE EQUAL MORE THAN 99?"

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it?"

Luke 15:4.

This past Thursday morning, I found this anonymous, hand-written letter addressed to me stuffed between the back-door entrance. Also enclosed in the letter was a \$10 bill. The letter reads as follows:

Dear Pastor Martyn,

A few months ago you talked to me and helped me very much, please put this to good use for God. Please ask him if the loneliness for the author of this could end soon and that a good job with good management might come along .... and tell him,

'Thank you very much for entering my life.

(Signed) Thanks a bunch.

I wonder what it's like to feel totally all ALONE when there are literally thousands of people around you; I've never felt that way -- but it must be very frightening!!

I wonder what it's like to think that you have been totally rejected by others?? Again - I've never been there, but it must feel very isolated ... very alienated!

I wonder what it's like to have little more than \$10, and to give up that \$10 out of gratitude -- NOT KNOWING WHERE THE NEXT \$10 will come from??? Again - I've never been there -- so I can't speak from experience!!

But I do know one thing for certain: the person who wrote this letter at least for one brief moment experienced new worth in life ... for one brief moment that person found SOME HOPE .... for at least one brief moment THAT PERSON NO LONGER FELT LOST ... for at least one moment -- that person felt accepted and loved -- so much so that he/she was willing to give up \$10 in thanksgiving -- a real sacrifice



of thanksgiving -- a greater sacrifice than more than 100 families of Hope have yet made in all of 1983!! That's right, there are still more than 100 families of Hope who have not yet given \$10 to our mission in all of 1983!!

Is it now more understandable why God says: 'if one is lost, does not the shepherd leave the ninety-nine ... and go after the one which is lost?' For one brief moment this past spring -- I evidently left the ninety-nine -- and gave my full attention TO THE ONE WHICH WAS LOST. It's pretty obvious from this letter HOW MUCH REJOICING REALLY GOES ON IN HEAVEN when we take the time to minister to the lost!!

But we all know the facts, don't we?? This isn't the way most of our time, our mission or our ministry is spent. And that truly goes for your pastors!! Regrettably -- there is very little time in my ministry ... or in our congregational ministry that is really devoted TO THE LOST -- to those who have become alienated .... or separated ... or enticed away from the flock.

Whether we like to admit it or not -- we tend to live more by the values of the world than the values of our Lord. And the values of the world are very clear when it comes to numbers: GO AFTER THE NINETY-NINE, AND DON'T WORRY ABOUT ONE LOUSY SHEEP!! The Madison Avenue Marketing Mentality has totally infected our mission and ministry in the church. The good news of Madison Avenue is that only BIG NUMBERS count; likewise, only the bottom line counts. That mentality asserts that we should not worry about one lousy account when we've still got 99 good ones. Go after the 99, and forget about the one.

Is it any wonder that this parable seems very passé in a world dominated by big numbers ... a world where micro-technology has made even BIGNESS much smaller!! How in such a world can one lost person really count?? How can the isolated and alienated and rejected EVER HAVE HOPE in a world of big conglomerates and ever-escalating technologies?? The facts are -- there is no great hope for the individual in the world. As salespeople often put it -- the world is the jungle -- the arena of fierce competition ... a market place which thrives on intimidation and rejection and wheeling/dealing and beating the other guy to the draw!!

As essential as that marketplace is to our daily lives, it very rarely functions as the kingdom of God -- as that place where we experience total love and acceptance and self-worth. The marketplace of the world creates alienation, separation and ulceration; the kingdom of God creates wholeness, harmony and healing! And it is God's intention that not one single person ever feel lost from his kingdom. That's why he makes such a fuss over one lousy sheep -- because he can't stand to see one single person separated from his healing love.

God's <sup>perception</sup> feelings about his family <sup>is</sup> are no different than yours or mine about our families. If we happen to have five children in our family -- and one of them is lost, we don't console ourselves by saying: Oh well, we've still got four left!! Quite to the contrary: if one is lost, we sound the emergency alert!! We leave the other four and search with abandon for that one lost child. The loss of a family member is not a moment for coolness and philosophical rationalism -- it's a moment for immediate action without even calculating the risks!! The illness or serious trouble of one of our children is not a moment for detached coolness & rationalism -- it is an emergency situation requiring action even to the neglect of the other family members.

The odds of this parable -- ninety-nine to one -- are meant as a dramatic device by Jesus to heighten the emergency aspect of the story. And that is the whole key to the understanding of the parable -- it is an emergency situation!! Policemen, firemen, emergency squads do this all the time! There are always situations in which the many are risked for the sake of the few!!

Dr. Richard Heffler, in his commentary on this parable, says, "This parable is not a picture of how love ordinarily acts, but how love acts in an emergency." In other words, the parable suggests that God's people are always on "Emergency Alert." -- always seeking the lost ... always seeking to fulfill God's purpose: TO AFFIRM THE SELF-WORTH OF EVERY INDIVIDUAL! From God's vantage point -- one lost person does equal more than 99 who are present!! God cannot stand to see one single person alienated or separated from the realm of his love.

Special

But God not only abhors the condition of separation -- he likewise cannot stand "incompleteness" within his body, his flock. If just one baptized person is missing from the flock - it means that God's family is incomplete. It not only means that the missing person is losing the family's support -- but it also means the family is losing the mission person's support. God has not created us to miss one another BUT TO SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER. And his realm of support is through the body of Christ, the church!!

Is it any wonder then that Jesus uses the imagery of a shepherd in this story?? The shepherd's task was not to go out and get new sheep -- the shepherd's task was to care for and protect and give comfort to those already in the fellowship! And obviously - that meant the shepherd's task was always ONE OF RESTORATION when one of the sheep had wandered away.

I sincerely hope we see the implications of this parable for our shepherding ministry together. Unlike what some of the popular evangelists proclaim -- the real test of the church is not its evangelistic programs -- nor its growth in membership -- nor the amount of money it gives to global missions. These are important and definitely part of the church's total mission. But the real acid test of a local church is the mutual concern and consolation offered between those in its fellowship!!

The real acid test of the church is its ability to convey to each and every member -- TO EVERY SINGLE PERSON -- that he/she is greatly loved and forever accepted by God and by his people!! That is why we baptize infants -- because we want God's children to know from the beginning that they are forever loved and accepted by God. But that is also why I walk down this aisle with every child baptized here -- to confirm your love and nurture for that child -- for it is through the body of Christ that every child comes to know the real meaning of God's love.

We can add hundreds of numbers to the church every year and gain absolutely nothing IF THOSE PERSONS DO NOT FEEL INDIVIDUALLY LOVE AND ACCEPTED BY THIS BODY OF CHRIST!! Members are not added to the church like ornaments hung on a Christmas tree -- they are grafted as living branches in order to become part of a living, caring organism called

the body of Christ.

Possibly all this can be best illustrated by the story of a cold sunny day in northern Wisconsin. A little boy had fallen through the ice of a nearby lake. His friends rushed to the general store where the men had just finished a town meeting. When the men heard the story -- they all rushed for the lake except one man. He said he had to stay; after all, someone had to care for the store. "And surely fourteen grown men ought to be able to save one little boy."

When the men got to the lake - they realized the ice was too thin for all of them to walk out to the boy. So they formed a human chain -- lying on their stomachs and thereby distributing their weight evenly on the ice. As the fourteenth man slid out and attached himself to the 13th man -- they all came to the realization THAT THEY WERE ONE MAN SHORT!!

The little boy could hang on no longer; he finally slipped beneath the ice and was gone. As the men headed back up the hill to the store -- they could hardly find the words to tell the one man who hadn't come THAT IT WAS HIS SON WHO HAD DROWNED!!

When the one who is lost is a member of our family -- then we know the real tragedy OF NOT RESPONDING TO A RESCUE EFFORT. God calls us to be his rescue team -- he calls us to value every person as if he/she was a son or daughter. He wants NO ONE to be lost from his realm of love. Let us take the time to seek out those who are feeling alone ... or rejected ... or guilty ... or worthless; let us rescue them with the loving forgiveness of Jesus Christ; and then let us truly rejoice FOR THE RENEWAL OF HARMONY AND WHOLENESS TO THE BODY OF CHRIST!

PENTECOST XVII

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
Sunday, October 7, 1984  
World Communion Sunday  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"OH WHAT A RELIEF IT IS!"

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven." Matthew 18:21-22

Picture this: The radio alarm awakens you at 6:00 a.m. A friendly voice says, "Good morning! Another day is being brought to you by your Great Uncle Max. Enjoy it!" Climbing out of bed, you get into the shower. As you finish waking up, you remember that your Great Uncle Max provides the water that flows through the pipes and the electricity that lights the bathroom and that drives the appliances you'll use when you get to the kitchen.

Great Uncle Max's name appears on all the labels in your clothes and in the fine print on the cans and jars and boxes in the cupboards. Uncle Max holds title to your house and car and is the beneficiary for your savings, life insurance, and all your investments. On the way to work, you will be reminded that "Uncle Max is With You" and that you are to "Do Your Best for Uncle Max Today."

At work you settle down with coffee and the morning newspaper for a quick look at the headlines. There on page one is a story saying that Great Uncle Max has called in somebody's portfolio. Like everyone else, the person was so far in debt to Uncle Max, he had to liquidate all his property to make payment.

These stories crop up all the time. You never know when Uncle Max will call on someone to pay up. You never know when you might be the next one. As you fold the newspaper and lay it down, you don't feel much like drinking any more coffee or even doing a day's work. Except you know you had better do it. Because somebody, who represents Uncle Max, is watching you.

Amazing how this story sounds like 1984, doesn't it? Big Brother is watching you. Can you imagine living in that kind of bondage and fear?? That kind of imprisonment?? How terrible to be totally controlled and accountable to Uncle Max!

Nagging at you all the time is the possibility, the probability, the certainty that one day he will call you in and ask you to make good -- to pay up for all he has given

you. Either pay up ... or be eliminated!

What must it feel like to live in bondage to Great Uncle Max? Fortunately, none of us has yet to encounter such a circumstance. I sincerely hope we never will. But we all know some of Uncle Max's relatives, don't we??

We have all had an encounter or two with Uncle Anger. We would like to think that Uncle Max is far worse, but dare we make such a claim? We know the feelings of being imprisoned by our own resentments and hurtfulness. We know how destructive Uncle Anger can really be! This bondage can totally consume us ... it can make us feel a sense of total indifference to those around us ... it can destroy all feelings of compassion toward others, esp. those who are hurting ... it can overwhelm us with emotions of self-pity and even self-hatred. Most devastating, Uncle Anger can totally crucify our inclination to forgive others.

Uncle Anger chooses vengefulness as his ally. The "hit 'em back" approach is the rule to live by in this imprisonment. This kind of bondage sees us putting bumper stickers on our car which say: "I don't get made ... I get even."

Obviously, Uncle Anger is not the only imprisoning power of our age. There are many others. Some people are in bondage to Grandfather Guilt. Others have become slaves of the sisters of slander and deceit. Still others have become bound to Aunt Perfection -- where they are forever seeking to fulfill somebody else's expectations. There are many relatives of Uncle Anger. And they all do the same thing -- they seek to make us forever captive to their destructive powers.

To be alive is to do battle with these powers of imprisonment. I isolate Uncle Anger today only because I see so many held captive by his power. I find myself so often a victim of his destructive energies. His powers cause each of us to feel depressed, demoralized, destructive, defeated, and even devious -- all symptoms of an overdose of anger. We're so often held captive to anger because we just can't believe that anyone out there really cares ... that anyone really comprehends our hurts ... that anyone really knows the agony of our struggles.

It's like the little boy who disobeyed his mother and his conscience bothered him. He was sneaking to his room when his mother asked him, "Where are you going, Frankie?" "To my room," he answered. "I want to talk with God." "Is it something you can't tell your mother?" "Yes, it is," said Frankie. "You'll just scold and punish me, while God will forgive me and forget about it."

How often we all feel like that little boy - that's so often our basic experience with the world: WE FEEL IMPRISONED BY THE ANGER ALL AROUND US ... IT APPEARS THAT NO ONE UNDERSTANDS. In fact, it appears that everyone is really just looking for an opportunity to "put us down." We desperately need RELIEF - but no one wants to offer it.

But there are those rare stories ... those rare moments to the contrary. Like the story of the Army sergeant and private in Viet Nam. The private was considered a real square and strange one because he always read the Bible. The rest of the platoon laughed at him ... they taunted him ... they made him the brunt of their many jokes. But he kept on reading his Bible. And that really irritated the sergeant, who considered himself an agnostic.

One night before going to bed, the private got down on his knees as was his custom to pray. This always made the sergeant furious. The sergeant began taking off his boots ... and in a fit of rage, flung the boots at the private clobbering him on the side of the head. But the private simply kept on praying.

The sergeant was totally amazed; he went to bed filled with bitterness. When he awoke the next morning, to his utter astonishment, his boots were standing beside his bed -- beautifully polished. The private's answer to the sergeant's hateful anger was forgiving love. The sergeant became a Christian that night through the power of a private's forgiving example. "Oh What A Relief It Was" when he finally let go of his anger.

There was another man very much like that private. He also did not have much rank. He likewise came from a simple family. He had very little clout with the authorities, and he was almost totally destitute of earthly goods. His life consisted largely of receiving charity from one town to the next. However, he had a very active prayer life ... and he could always be counted on to listen to anyone's problems.

He also was despised by the people around him. Some called him the very embodiment of the devil. Others accused him of being a "bum" ... of living like a drunk. Many of the sophisticated religious people attacked him for being blasphemous and disrespectful of God. Thousands considered him a "fool" because he seemingly loved everyone, even tax collectors and prostitutes. Like the army private, this man was also laughed at, spit upon, mocked and ridiculed, and finally even crucified. And for all this -- he did not change his ways one bit. As he hung on the cross, he said: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

There is only one power which can set us free from the multitude of bondages in life. It is the power of Christ's

forgiving love. It is a power that I can offer to you in mere words ... as I am now doing. But Jesus himself said it could be experienced more personally. He wanted his disciples to more fully experience the power of his forgiveness. And for that reason he instituted the Sacrament of the Altar -- so that each of us could personally experience the presence of his body and blood. He wanted each of us personally SET FROM OF OUR SINS. He wanted each of us personally to experience the RELIEF OF HIS FORGIVING PRESENCE.

And to illustrate that power in today's text, he told the story of a man whose bondage ... whose indebtedness was beyond comprehension -- 10,000 talents. Scholars indicate that 10,000 talents can be valued anywhere between 10 million and several billion dollars. The point was made: the debt was astronomical. But the master cancelled it.

That represents God's graciousness toward us. How can we be forgiven so much, and still be captive to our puny debts, our little angers, our silly disagreements with one another?? Jesus says through this parable there is no way! To receive God's gracious forgiveness is to be totally relieved of all burdens! There can be only one response: TO FORGIVE AS WE HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN. Oh what a relief it is!!

A Turkish soldier had beaten a Christian soldier until he was lying half-conscious. As he was kicking the Christian in the stomach, he asked: "Now there ... what can your Christ do for you??" The Christian calmly replied, "He can give me the strength to forgive you."

That's the relief each of us desires ... and that's the RELIEF THAT GOD ALONE OFFERS. Even the bondage of Uncle Max cannot destroy that relief. Not even the bondage of death can deny the power of Christ's forgiveness and resurrection. OH WHAT A RELIEF IT IS -- TO KNOW THAT WE HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN. We are free from yesterday's anger, from yesterday's fear, from yesterday's guilt and burdens. Free to live anew today -- set free to give ... and give ... and give what we have first received -- the power of Christ's love. OH WHAT A RELIEF IT IS!

AMEN



PENTECOST XVII  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
October 4, 1987 (World Communion Sunday)  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

**"TO FORGIVE IS DIVINE!"**

"Then Peter came up and said to him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say seven, but seventy times seven.'" Matthew 18:21-22

In reflecting upon this morning's text on "forgiveness," I have felt a lot of uneasiness. "Uneasiness" because "forgiving" has become another easy word like "loving" in our church vocabulary. We hear it so much ... we suggest it so often ... we preach it so regularly ... that it becomes one of those "nod-your-head" expressions.

But does forgiving really have any impact upon our lives? What difference has it made to you and me to say that "God forgives us?!" How many of us really feel sinful? How many of us really desire to be forgiven? One commentator has said that the middle- and upper-class ethos today shuns sin. They don't want to hear about it ... they don't want any implication in it ... and they don't want any preaching about it. Obviously, the logical consequence of such thinking is that there's no need for forgiveness. If you and I don't feel sinful, then we certainly don't need forgiveness.

Well, nothing is further from the truth -- WE ARE ALL SINFUL. But what will help us recognize our sinfulness without becoming defensive about it?? And even more - how can we appreciate God's forgiveness and thereby become more forgiving? Those are the issues before us today. Or stated in that famous quote: "To error is human, to forgive is divine." How can we uplift our divinity without losing our humanity?? Let me repeat that question: HOW CAN WE UPLIFT OUR DIVINITY WITHOUT LOSING OUR HUMANITY??

There have been two historical answers to this question. The first is: By becoming more religious! The second answer looks very similar, but is very different: By becoming more the person of Jesus Christ! Let's look at these and see which one best uplifts our divinity without losing our humanity.

The first says: BECOME MORE RELIGIOUS. This response capitalizes on the sinfulness of the world. It sees the created world and all that's in it as a dungheap. Thus, the only way to God's forgiveness is by "becoming more religious" -- that is, separating yourself from the material things of the world. Such was the impetus of the early monastic movement. For those early Christians - the only way to God's forgiveness was to defy all connections with the real world. Severe yourself from anything human and then you will finally experience the divine.

Many of us in this room today grew up as the by-products of this highway to heaven. As a child, I vividly remember all the sermons about no dancing, no drinking, no card playing, no gambling, no contact with the opposite sex. All these human negations were supposed to lead to a divine affirmation - a positive experience of God. Well, they didn't -- did they? They simply gave me a very nauseating feeling about God.

Becoming more "religious" by cutting yourself off from human experiences does not make us more like Christ. The biblical tradition never suggested the monastic life as the divine ideal. This was the notion of some impotent priest. The biblical model is quite different. Just this week, Pastor Bob mailed an example of the biblical model to local college students. The pamphlet, called "Singing in a Strange New Land," suggests that students read Psalm 109 as a prelude to thinking about forgiveness. Listen to this:

God, whom I praise, do not be deaf!  
Evil and treacherous people  
Open their mouths against me.  
They address me with lying tongues;  
Words of hate surround me,  
Attacking me for no reason.  
Send the Evil One against them;  
Let the Avenger confront each one.  
Find them guilty when they are judged;  
Reckon their prayers as sin.  
Let their days be few; ...

That's pretty strong stuff, isn't it? What it says quite frankly is that LIFE IS NOT DIVINE! It is filled with treacherous people ... with lying and deceit ... with distress and disappointments ... with curses and criticisms ... with hurts and horrors ... with tragedies and tribulations. The biblical model recognizes that LIFE IS NOT EASY ... NOT FAIR ... NOT PLEASANT ... HARDLY A BED OF ROSES! But it doesn't suggest that we try to escape from all this stuff. Rather, it urges us to vent our deepest hurts and heartaches to God and to each other! First, the biblical model says we must let God know of our anger with him and creation BECAUSE HE CAN TAKE IT ... HE UNDERSTANDS OUR FEELINGS OF IMPOTENCE IN THIS WORLD.

This past Wednesday, as I was sitting with a family for several hours in the Intensive Care area, one family member finally blurted out: "I'm really angry that God has let this happen!" A hospital volunteer immediately responded: "You shouldn't be angry with God." I couldn't keep my mouth shut. I said, "Oh, I think it's o.k. for him to vent his anger ... I think God can handle his anger a lot better than we can. And I know one thing for certain: God will forgive his anger much more quickly than I will!"

The first step of divine forgiveness IS THAT WE FEEL FREE TO VENT WHATEVER WE NEED TO VENT AT GOD AND EACH OTHER! No story better illustrates this "venting need" than the one of the couple in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. Their 18-yr-old only son was driving to work one morning when he was hit head-on and killed instantly by a 24-yr-old man who had passed out at the wheel. Breathalyzer tests confirmed that the 24-yr-old had three times the legal maximum of alcohol for driving in his body.

With great satisfaction - the couple rejoiced when the drunkard was sent up for life to the state prison. In fact, for the first two years the couple regularly drove by the penitentiary nursing their hatred by making sure that he was still in there. They were really venting their anger. But as months passed, they soon felt their anger had become a cancer. They no longer felt good at church ... they had become cynical and depressing ...and their friends began to shun them because they were no longer pleasant company.

Obviously - the biblical witness urges us to "vent" with God and each other as a first step. BUT WE ARE NEVER TO STAY THERE. A second step is more important. We are to find God's pipeline of mercy. We are to find God's community which will connect us with more than resentful feelings. Fortunately, this couple remained connected to their church ... as painful as it was. And during the third year after the tragedy - the mother began to visit the self-confessed murderer in prison. This led the couple to requesting "released time" for the prisoner to spend with them on Sunday afternoons. Soon they began picking him up for Sunday morning worship and Sunday dinner. Then they began arranging speaking engagements where together they spoke on public platforms against drinking and driving. And now today, the one who murdered their son has become their newly accepted member of the family. "To error is human; to forgive is divine." This couple was uplifted by divine forgiveness while still knowing the painful loss of humanity.

Venting is so often a necessary first step -- but never the final biblical reality. Divine forgiveness is always the essential second and final step. It is the step which says we are not seeking to become more religious ... but rather to become more the person of Jesus Christ. I commend all of you who are here today -- BECAUSE YOU HAVE GONE BEYOND THE FIRST STEP! You have gone beyond mere venting of hurts and hungers. Oh, we dare not kid each other -- we have been venting like crazy this past week ... our anger, our frustration, our petty gripes, our human disappointments -- we have been venting them at God, at each other, and at creation itself (esp. on the golf course). This week, like every other week of our lives, we have been living with revenge and rebuke and rebuttal and refusal and reprisal and rejection.

But like that couple in Hopkinsville, Kty, all this venting has not made life more satisfactory ... more peaceful ... more harmonious. In fact, it has made it more horrible!!

It has again confirmed for us our human sinfulness! And whether we admit it or not -- each of us wants to be free from that vengeful, putrid part of our humanity. Each of us wants to be connected to a conduit that uplifts us to our greatest potential -- our human divinity! And that conduit is nothing but Holy Communion.

In Holy Communion, we receive our divinity -- our divine forgiveness. In Holy Communion, God enables us to love and forgive ourselves. In Holy Communion, God relieves what our venting and vengefulness cannot relieve -- our horrible hurts and heartaches regarding the human losses and errors of life. In Holy Communion - God totally forgives our great human debt of vengefulness!!

You see -- our vengefulness, our anger and its associated guilt is comparable to the 10,000 talents in today's parable. Human vengefulness in this world is a tremendous debt upon all our heads. It is our astronomical vengefulness that causes all the misery and heartache in this world. But in Holy Communion - God cancels that debt ... he does not force us to pay anything for our anger. Instead, he asks us to be the pipeline, the conduit of his mercy.

That's why Holy Communion is a heart-throb to Christians throughout the world. Because in Holy Communion God grabs us by our hearts! He grabs us by the seat of our emotions, and says: "Now that you've received my heart-felt gift of mercy, give it away!" So I ask you today - have you signed the organ donor card on the back of your driver's license?? Well, if you have, then it's the second time that you've signed it. Because the first time was at your baptism.

In Holy Baptism - you pledged to stay connected to the conduit of Holy Communion -- you pledged to stay connected to the heart of God. But you also pledged to give away the same heart that you received from God.

And how many hearts has God given to you and me?? A hundred? A thousand? No, seventy times seven! He has given us a heart which never needs a transplant -- because it's his heart of divine forgiveness. And that's something that we're not here to just talk about ... or to think about ... or to study about! That's something we're here to transplant into the lives of one another! For "to error is human, to forgive is divine." And God has made it possible for us to uplift his divinity without losing our humanity!!

AMEN

PENTECOST XVII  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
September 14, 1986  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"LOST . . . AND FOUND!"

"Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear (Jesus). But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' Then Jesus told them this parable: 'Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home.'" Luke 15:1-5

It doesn't take much of a search for a preacher or a social critic to find conditions of "lostness" in our world today. Not too many weeks ago our whole nation was shocked at the death of Len Bias, an outstanding young athlete - considered to be the best college basketball player in the nation. Already drafted by the Boston Celtics, he had everything going for him -- youth, anticipated wealth, and perfect health. Then suddenly he was dead -- a heart attack -- officially attributed to cocaine use.

The frightening thing was that Len Bias was no hood -- no pervert or prankster from the slums. One USA Today editor wrote: "If Len Bias, with all the strengths of family, religion, education, wealth, and sports could not resist the pressure of drugs from his "cool friends" -- then how much more vulnerable must our children be to peer pressures?!? There are many "lost" to drugs and alcohol among our nation's youth ... and they must be FOUND.

Almost at the same time as Bias' death, newspapers carried the account of a suicide of a 55-yr old U.S. senator from North Carolina. Ironically, Sen. John East was a strong advocate of the pro-life movement. Yet, in response to his own declining health, he chose the easy way out - he committed suicide. There are many "lost" even among our most influential leaders today ... and they must be FOUND.

There is equal "lostness" amidst fidelity and faithfulness today. Commitments to marriage, to church, to community, to caring for one another - ALL THESE ARE VIEWED AS FLEXIBLE. In some ways many feel today like the couple that had been married for 70 years. One hot afternoon they sat on the front porch rocking away. The wife(99) looked at the old man, now nearly deaf, and with admiration in her voice said, "Zeke, I'm really proud of you!" He looked at her and said, "What's that you say, May?" She raised her voice, "I said, I'm proud of you!" He looked away and said, "Yea, I'm tired of you too, May!" There's much fatigue and

failure with faithfulness and fidelity these days -- certainly a reflection of the "lost" who desire to be FOUND AND LOVED in our culture.

And we could add to all these just a general lack of direction - plain old confusion. There's a lostness of heroes ... of people to look up to ... of real authorities. Heroes today are no longer sheltered -- the media discloses their warts and weaknesses as well as their wisdom and wonder. Society seems to be in a desperate search for someone to follow. We're like the fellow who was driving home in the dense fog. The only object that he could see clearly were the taillights ahead of him - so he decided to follow that car. Suddenly, without warning, the taillights came to a complete stop, and he ran into the other car. The man got out of his car and yelled, "Hey, why didn't you give me a warning that you were going to stop!" To which the other driver replied, "Why should I - I was in my own garage!" We sometimes get "VERY LOST" merely following the lead of others. We're often driving lost in a fog ... desperately hoping to be found.

These are but a sampling of many of the conditions of "lostness" in our world. We could add others like terrorism and racism, the agony of the aged and poor, the malnutrition of the hungry and hopeless. It is so easy to look out there and see all the lostness. And there are many LOST OUT THERE WHO NEED TO BE FOUND. But that's my greatest temptation and yours today -- to look out there, and point a finger at the "lostness" beyond ourselves. Texts like this really tempt the preacher to ONLY LOOK OUT THERE AND DO A REAL NUMBER ON ALL THE DIRT AND DRIFTING IN THE WORLD - drugs, alcohol, prostitution, pornography -- we really want to take these "lost souls" to the cleaners!"

But today's text doesn't look out there for lostness. The focus of our text today is the Pharisee and the scribe -- the righteous of Jewish society. And with that focus, then Jesus tells the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin. What is he trying to say? Obviously, "to be lost" in the biblical sense "meant to be separated from God." Was Jesus saying that the Pharisees and Scribes "were lost" - were separated from God? Was Jesus saying that the religious needed to be rescued just as much as those whom they considered "lost." That's exactly what he was saying in this parable. He was directing this text at those who had become EXCLUSIVE ... SELF-PROTECTIVE ... those who had become stubbornly self-superior ... those who were LOST in their views of righteousness and repentance.

The Pharisees and scribes were the grumbling ones -- always chastising Jesus for associating with sinners, tax collectors, and other outcasts. By conducting themselves in this way, they had convinced Jesus that they were truly lost -- because they had separated themselves from God's truth of mercy and justice. They were lost in their theology of

exclusiveness. They were lost in their understanding of righteousness as "moral perfection" - rather than loving forgiveness and merciful justice. Their understanding of religion was that all sinners should be rounded up, loaded onto a caravan of camels, and sent into the desert to die.

Is it any wonder that Jesus was attacking the Pharisees and scribes. They had totally contradicted Christ's teachings. They were teaching that God only seeks the righteous; Christ was teaching that God seeks all humanity, especially the weak, the sinful, the outcast, and the underdog, THE LOST.

It's obvious why Jesus included this parable for the righteous and religious -- because sometimes we are the most lost of all sheep. Like the Pharisees and scribes -- sometimes we play their games. We demand moral perfection from one another before we'll help one another. We demand that others "live in the same exclusive part of town" before we will serve them. We demand that prospective members fit our socio-economic profile rather than our profession of faith in Christ. In short, we confess one faith, but live by a different religion.

It is one thing to confess one's love for sinners, but quite another to associate with them. As one socialite recently told a social worker: "I will give generously to the needy, just so long as I don't have to touch any of them." It is one thing to preach and profess the Gospel; it is quite another to practice it.

The real truth is that God especially seeks and searches after those who reflect superiority ... and self-righteousness ... and exclusiveness, BECAUSE THOSE TRAITS OFTEN LEAD TO THE WORST FORMS OF LOSTNESS. Such self-inflated profiles DO LEAD TO alcoholism, divorce, hedonism, sexual perversion, and many of the other "lost" conditions of the world. God diligently searches for those who have become "exclusive" and "superior" in their faith -- BECAUSE THEY MUST BE HUMBLD AND TURNED AROUND.

Certainly this is true among many religious leaders. Whether pastors or educators or even lay leaders, we are sometimes so busy with our agendas OF PROVING HOW GOOD WE ARE that we forget about the weak, the lonely, the hungry, and the hopeless! That's why God searches sometimes more diligently after us -- because many times we need to be humbled. And many other times we just need to be forgiven because we have allowed our big agendas to crowd out God's needy little people. We righteous ones, who are called to be the most merciful, the most forgiving, the most loving, are sometimes the least! We desperately need to be FOUND AND FORGIVEN BY GOD!

In some ways this reality was appropriately illustrated in the movie, THE KARATE KID. Johnnie (the rival of the Karate Kid) and his friends have been following a karate instructor who is the epitome of superiority and exclusiveness -- the macho influence of the world which says "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps." This basic mentality says, "Strike first, strike hard, and never show mercy!" This instructor saw himself as the greatest of the great. His philosophy was: "Be on top ... don't have feelings for the weak ... and if necessary, break down the opposition with corruption to be a winner!"

This same mentality of "superiority," "exclusiveness," "self-righteousness" has infected our society ... and many Christian churches as well. The whole aim of life is to be on the top ... to be exclusive and tough; forget about compassion and mercy ... just put the weak in their place.

Daniel Laruso, THE KARATE KID, the new kid on the block in L.A., takes his lessons from Mr. Miyagi, a warm but very disciplined Oriental maintenance man. Mr. Miyagi believes that love teaches great discipline and high standards of responsibility. But above all, love shows mercy.

This movie graphically reflects the grace, healing and mercy of God. Here is a God who mercifully searches for weak sinners, but also diligently seeks out the misguided strong. For both are lost! Both the sinfully weak and the misguided strong need to recover the grace and mercy of their Father.

That's why we're all here today, both weak and strong. Because that' God's redemption plan -- to bring both the weak and the strong together - to support and serve each other. Under both conditions, WE ARE LOST ... BUT NOW WE ARE FOUND. And there is no greater joy in heaven or on earth than when God has turned both his sinful weak and his self-righteous strong into his merciful servants. That is our mission and our ministry: TO WELCOME ALL SINNERS, AND TO EAT WITH EACH OTHER AROUND THE TABLE OF CHRIST'S MERCY AND FORGIVENESS.

We do not come here to feel sad about the lostness of the world. We do not come here to point fingers of condemnation at the lostness in the world. we come here to rejoice and celebrate that God has found us -- AND THAT NOW HE CAN USE US TO BRING MERCY AND HEALING LOVE TO ALL CONDITIONS OF LOSTNESS IN THE WORLD. Thanks be to God -- WE ARE NEVER LOST!

AMEN.



PENTECOST XVII (WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY)

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

October 4, 1992

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"NEVER TOO LOST TO BE FOUND!"

"Which one of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices ... and calls together his friends and says: 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost!'" Luke 15:3-6

In many ways, most of us are very much like the Pharisees of today's gospel - always murmuring against tax collectors or anyone else who messes with our life, liberty & pursuit of happiness. We can certainly understand how Jesus would be pleased to dine with each of us. After all, we are the righteous and religious ones of this community -- we are the respectable and successful. But how in God's name could Jesus be comfortable -- how could he even tolerate eating and fellowshiping with the riff-raff of his society -- tax collectors, persecutors, embezzlers, welfare recipients, prostitutes -- all those sinners?! And then he goes on from this dispickable condition and teaches an even more ridiculous parable: that you leave the majority and go in search of just THE ONE that is lost!!

Well, that may sound ridiculous and wierd ... as long as "THE ONE" lost has no relationship to you or me. But how do we feel when that "lost or injured one" happens to be our own child?? We will seek out their security & protection with abandon!! This summer, DCE Debbie and I had that experience at Cedar Point. Even though we had instructed the PYG's to always stay with us or the group ... and to always remember the rules and report to us if anyone/anything went wrong: TWO OF OUR LITTLE SHEEP DECIDED TO GO OFF ON THEIR OWN (in front of me today). We spent 3 hours looking for those two lost sheep. We could have just said: "Oh well, twenty are still with us; let's just have fun with those who have been faithful and followed the rules; let's forget about the disobedient ones - they'll get what they deserve!" Well, we looked & looked & looked - and finally, we found! For me, it was almost cause for another heart attack. But when you treasure every sheep (and when you know their parents will have your head) - no matter how much they have disobeyed and violated the rules -- you seek and search until they are found!!

And that's the message, the motivation, and the mentality of our God. We are NEVER TOO LOST TO BE FOUND! Each one of us is precious to Him, no matter how far we have strayed from his directions or his fold. It reminds me of the story told by Elizabeth Sherril. She had made her way through a drenching rain to a noontime concert at the local library. It turned out that she was the only one who made it - SHE WAS AN AUDIENCE OF ONE! The flutist, pianist, and page turner went through the whole concert for just that one person. In thanking them profusely after a flawless performance, Elizabeth

said: "To think that you played IT ALL JUST FOR ME - just one person! I wish a thousand others had heard you!" The flutist replied: "Just one person? If one person isn't important, then how can a thousand be?!" Is it any wonder God says: "Which one of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, doesn't leave the 99 and go after the one that is lost?" Our God does not count in hundreds, thousands, or millions - he counts one by one! Just like the repentant thief on the cross, God's joy is only complete when each and every one of us is within the secure fold of his love!

And as we all know - all sheep (meaning us) stray & wander! And once away from the shepherding security of God's word, we become prey of the wolves of this world. We all remember Len Bias of the Boston Celtics a few years back. He had everything going for him - youth, anticipated wealth, and perfect health. But the cocaine wolves got to him first - and soon he was lost to the fold of life! But "lostness" is not only a condition of drug peddlers and prostitutes. There's the continuing "lostness" of terrorism and racism in this world ... the "lostness" of the aged and the poor ... the "lostness" caused by malnutrition, hunger, homelessness, alcohol and child abuse ... list goes on and on! And in this year of election, there's even a real "lostness" of leaders and those that we can really look up to. If I've heard it once, I've heard it a hundred times: nobody seems to be real excited with the presidential choices of 1992 (even with Ross Perot back in the race)! OUR WORLD AND SOCIETY SEEMS TO BE MAKING A DESPARATE SEARCH FOR SOMEONE TO FOLLOW! And yet, we seem to be "fogged in" by the choices. We're like the fellow who was driving home in the dense fog. He couldn't tell which way to go, so he just decided to follow the tail lights in front of him. Suddenly, without warning, the tail lights came to an abrupt halt - and he rearended the other car. He got out of his car and yelled: Hey, stupid, why didn't you give me a warning that you were going to stop!" To which the other driver replied: "Why should I - I was already in my own garage!" As the saying goes - sometimes we become even more lost when we follow the lead of those we don't know!

Is it any wonder that Jesus uses the imagery of the good shepherd in this parable? Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, reached out to the world by sacrificing his own life in order to embrace every one who believes and reconcile them to his Father. Christ makes clear that the good shepherd's task is always to care for and protect and assure that no sheep will be lost from the fold. Thus, good shepherds are always about the business of RESTORATION -- making certain that every single sheep is NEVER TOO LOST TO BE FOUND!!

I sincerely hope we see the implications of this parable for our own shepherding ministry. Unlike what some of the popular evangelists proclaim (Jeff's class) - the real test of the church is NOT its GROWTH in membership, facilities, programs, possibilities, or popularity. Obviously, growth in programs and people is a PART of the total mission. But the

real acid test of the local church is the MUTUAL CONCERN AND CONSOLATION DEMONSTRATED AND OFFERED BY THOSE IN ITS FOLD!!

The real acid test of the church is its ability to convey to each and every member - TO EVERY SINGLE PERSON - that he/she is greatly loved, forgiven, needed, and accepted by God and his people! That is why we baptize infants (like Hope) -- because we want children to know from the very beginning whom they are to follow ... who died for them ... and that they can NEVER BE LOST WHEN FOUND WITH GOD ... that God personally says to each of them: YOU ARE MINE FOREVER! FOLLOW ME AND YOU WILL HAVE THE ABUNDANT LIFE! That is also why I (others) walk down the aisle with every baptized infant here -- to confirm your love and nurture for that child. For it is only through the body of Christ that every child comes to know THAT GOD CAN BE COUNTED ON ... THAT GOD WILL ALWAYS BE FOUND HERE ... that he will show you the way, the truth and the life! That is also why these 5th & 6th graders are invited to the Table of the Lord today -- because here again God confirms that WITH HIM, WE CAN NEVER BE LOST - FOR WE HAVE FOUND WHAT WE NEED: the presence of His forgiving love & security! (What a tragedy for children who have never had this experience!)

Dear friends in Christ - we can add hundreds of members to our church every year and gain absolutely nothing IF THESE PERSONS DO NOT EXPERIENCE INDIVIDUALLY THE GRACE & ACCEPTANCE OF CHRIST! Members are not added to the church like ornaments are added to our Christmas trees. In Holy Baptism, God grafts us as living branches so that through Holy Communion we might always be his living, caring organism called THE ONE BODY OF CHRIST!! To be in this body is to be certain that we can NEVER BE TOO LOST TO BE FOUND!!

As St. Paul exclaims in today's second lesson, this body is to be the earthly example of the utmost patience and mercy of Christ. That steadfast love of Christ NEVER LETS US BE LOST no matter how unloveable we make ourselves because of the wolves of this world. Christ always sits at table with us -- loving us and forgiving us and hoping we will be renewed by his example! He kept on loving his disciples even when they argued about who would get the biggest throne in his kingdom. He kept on forgiving them even when they fell asleep in his greatest hour of need. And even when they deserted him. And even when they pretended they didn't know him. Yes, he kept on loving Paul even when Paul threatened and persecuted the faithful, even when Paul blasphemed God's holiness, even when Paul made a mockery of Christ. We are NEVER TOO LOST TO BE FOUND BY THE LOVE AND FORGIVENESS OF GOD.

God never gives up on us even when we're tempted to give up on ourselves. On this 50th Anniversary of Columbus' discovery of this great land, it is good to recall that Columbus himself was almost persuaded to "give up" on his discovery! After his crew of 90 sailors on three ships had been at sea for four weeks - longer than anyone at that time had sailed away from land - on October 10, 1492 the crew

demanded that Columbus turn back. Just two days later - October 12th - by the light of the moon, land was sighted. God's perseverance with us is like that of Columbus - he will never GIVE UP ON US even two days short of the end of our earthly lives! To the very last moment, he hungers and seeks our response of faithful repentance -- of seeing us back in the fold and saying "we're sorry" for the stupidity of getting lost and following other gods.

Arthur Gordon reflects that spirit in telling of a recent memorial service of a well-known business leader. Several friends had stood up to give their testimonials of this great industrial leader. But near the end, a young black man arose. The other speakers had been eloquent, dignified and self-assured; this man was standing under great emotional and personal stress ... struggling for words amidst this nearly all white audience.

Finally, with tears streaming down his face, he told the crowd that when he was just an office boy, the industrialist had noticed him, helped him, encouraged him and paid for his education. "For a long time," the young black said, "I was no good to him or to anyone else. But he never gave up on me -- and he never let me give up on myself." The black man finally ended by saying that "anyone could support a success, but that only a rare and wonderful spirit could continue to have faith in a failure!"

That is the "rare and wonderful spirit of God!" And that is the "rare and wonderful spirit" of World Wide Communion Sunday ... and every other Sunday in this place! This is the meal in which God gathers and supports not only those who have tasted success, but in which he continues to show his faith in those who have been stigmatized as failures ... as losers in this world. Through this holy meal, he transforms sheep into shepherds, failures into successes, losers into winners! And once we have allowed his spirit to empower us - never again in this world will A SINGLE ONE OF US BE LOST OR LOSERS. QUITE TO THE CONTRARY, WE WILL ALWAYS BE FOUND VICTORIOUS IN that body and spirit of his forgiving love. So, let us rejoice and be glad that we HAVE BEEN FOUND AS ONE WITH HIM ... AND THAT THERE IS NOTHING IN ALL CREATION WHICH WILL SEPARATE US FROM THE TABLE OF OUR LORD AND HIS FORGIVING LOVE!

AMEN.

PENTECOST XVII

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

September 18, 1994

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"OUT OF NEUTRAL!"

What good is it, brothers & sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead!

James 2:14-16

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses & follow me." Mk 8:34

As most of you know, I was born shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor (that makes me a mere kid for some of you & an old man for others). Anyway, my remembrances of WWII are very dim -- I don't remember the war bonds, the victory gardens, the fireside chats, the rousing speeches or the blue & gold stars on the banners in front windows (Michigan had not yet become a big ten power). Most of all, I don't remember anything about the OPA - the Office of Price Administration & Civilian Supply.

Some of you remember the OPA and its main task: the job of rationing. Rationing is something I've never once experienced in my lifetime. Today we only ration by choice - usually when we want to lose weight. But I'm told that most people complained a lot about "rationing" during WWII -- but I'm also told that it was very effectively administered (one of the better programs of government). Again, I've been told that there were a variety of reactions to rationing: some people stock-piled, others went out on the black market and bought things for 50 times their worth, and still others just became hopeless and gave up. These people essentially quit; they almost dropped out of society.

A fellow Luth pastor, Norm Lucas, related a story to me of one such person -- a man who just gave up and quit. This person was pretty well-off and had just purchased a 1940 Buick. The man had been allocated a class "A" gasoline ration book. I've been told that class A books only allowed enough gasoline to get around town - but not enough for long trips. So this man applied for a "B" book -- which were reserved for employees in essential industry & business.

As you might guess, the man was denied a B book. But instead of using his A book, he put his Buick up on blocks. That was early in 1942. And the Buick sat there on blocks in his garage until rationing was lifted - four years later in 1946. "If he couldn't drive his Buick as much as he wanted to, then by jingoe, he wasn't going to drive that Buick at all!" But every Sunday morning he'd go out to the garage, climb in his Buick, start her up, and let her run for five minutes. "Just to keep her purring," he said. After warming her up, he'd cut the engine, give the accelerator two pumps,

and let her sit there until next Sunday morning. This went on for four years. For over 1400 days, that Buick didn't move an inch! She just sat there in the garage -- gassed up, warmed up, and revved up -- but never moving a mile. Never OUT OF NEUTRAL!!

As James looked around at the contemporary church of his day, he saw things pretty much the way I've described this man with his 1940 Buick: NEVER OUT OF NEUTRAL! Much like Peter in today's gospel, there were evidently many in James' day who were quick to make their confession of belief: "Jesus is my Messiah!" They confessed regularly at worship; they dressed up for the part every Lord's day; they put on all the proper and pious facial expressions that come with Sabbath morning faithfulness. **But when confronted by those who were "less well off," these "confessing Christians" ignored them or demeaned them.** For James, these faithful were like 1940 Buicks up on blocks: they looked good, they sounded good, they revved up religiosity on Sunday morning ... but that was about it for their faith: **THEY NEVER GOT OUT OF NEUTRAL!** They lived a standstill faith rather than a faith that moved the mountains of evil and indifference in the world around them.

In many ways, Peter was just another good example of this type of faith. But at least he deserves one accolade that many in James' day and our own fail to live up to: **HE WAS ABLE TO TAKE A STAND AND GET BEYOND THE POPULAR OPINION OF HIS DAY.** He was certainly more convicted than the silent majority around him: the other eleven disciples basically there silently and only spoke by giving opinions of what they had heard others say. At least Peter made the proper confession: "You are the Messiah, the Son of God!" But where Peter went wrong ... and where many confessors in James' church went wrong ... and where many Christians today **STILL GO WRONG** is by affirming a faith **THAT IS "NOT YET OUT OF NEUTRAL!"** They are unwilling to have a faith like their Messiah which is willing to suffer and die for the glory of God!

That's the real question that each of us must answer in the presence of God and each other: **"What difference has it made to confess Jesus as Messiah?"** In fact, some Christians today are still "in neutral" about this confession of Jesus as Messiah. They are like the eleven other disciples - swayed more by popular opinion than by the faith of their fathers & mothers. They will attest that Jesus was a great man, a good teacher, an important prophet -- but they will not affirm that Jesus and God **ARE ONE!** For these who are neutrally agnostic, there is no absolute proof that will get them off their blocks of unbelief. Certainly I cannot prove to anyone that Jesus is the Messiah! I can only attest to the **FACT OF FAITH** that no man or woman has ever more perfectly revealed the character of a gracious, merciful, forgiving, compassionate, patient and long-suffering God than this man from Nazareth. And as for me and my family of faith, that's more than enough to enable me to say, "Jesus Christ - you are the Messiah!"

But as previously stated, it's the deeper dimension of the question that threw Peter, that threw those in James' church, and that still throws most of us here today! Once we confess Jesus as Messiah - then how do we see that messianic confession fulfilled? Or to put it into James' framework - is it enough to have a confession of faith without a lifestyle of sacrificial works? (That's why we baptize Claire publicly this morning ... because she not only needs the assurance of God's grace ... she also needs to hear over and over again from Jesus her Messiah, "By your fruits, Claire, will you show your faithfulness to God!)" (Yes,) Jesus categorically answers that it requires more than saying "I believe" to be truly faithful. He says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me." Jesus made pretty clear that Peter's understanding of Messiah was flawed. Jesus' followers yield their lives, their time, their money, their whole being -- they quickly get "out of neutral" after verbal confession. They turn loose instead of holding tight!!

Peter represents so many disciples who have sight but lack insight. He knows what to say, but he doesn't understand its meaning. He's like the child who always knows the right answers to the questions but still doesn't grasp the concept of living by those answers. Faith has to be trained and educated, but it must move beyond the blocks of a "book club" confession. Over the years a multitude of people have been in my bible studies and Larry's studies and in good religion courses at Wittenberg: these confessors know "the right answers" to the faith. They know how to confess. They know how to rev up the engine of religion. But when that faith is put to the test -- when they have been asked to serve, whether it's Habitat or human hunger, they often resist the importance of such essential works of faith. When they have been wronged, when they have suffered disease or loss, when they have been struck down by unfair tragedy or human error -- then comes the time to SEE HOW FAITH FINALLY WORKS! Will they be willing to glorify God by serving him? Will they continue to be forgiving even when they have been unfairly forsaken? Will they continue to be kind even when they have been arrogantly abused? Will they continue to be merciful even when nobody has come to their aid?

Jesus is the Messiah because he lived an authentic faith wherein confession was consistent with action! Even though he was wronged and mocked and mutilated by a mob, he continued to MINISTER WITH THE MINDSET AND METHOD OF GOD HIS FATHER! He swallowed his human pride and offered the divine grace of forgiveness and the godly patience of understanding. His faith was more than revving up the engines on Sunday morning; his faith was a daily sacrifice of self for the transformation of a sinful world. Obviously, you and I can never expect to reflect that kind of integrity of faith; but since we confess it every Sunday, we should certainly be doing something about working toward it on Monday thru Saturday!

So my confessing friends, how often do you and I get OUT OF NEUTRAL each week? Let no one be fooled by this so-called simple question: this is a hard world to become "geared up" as a Christian. The mindset and method today is equally or more demonic than it was in James or Jesus' day: that mindset says "save your own skin and don't worry about anyone else or how the chips fall;" that method demonstrates itself by "getting all you can get with gusto, cause you only go round once in this life." This has become the mindset and the method of the Messiahs of this world.

And you need only look back three days to see the epitome of this messianic method fully in action: THE AMERICAN BASEBALL TRADITION HAS BEEN PUT UP ON BLOCKS AND IT WILL REMAIN IN NEUTRAL FOR WHO KNOWS HOW LONG?! The players and owners cannot and will not GET OUT OF NEUTRAL as long as greed and glorification-of-self remain the ruling powers for human negotiation. Are there other problems in this world? Where do you stand on Haiti or Cuban refugees? Are you OUT OF NEUTRAL with Jesus the Messiah or are you "UP ON BLOCKS" with the popular opinions of our day! It amazes me that popular opinion in this country has now conformed to crucifying dictators of the world when only a couple of years ago everybody was cheering the overthrow of Saddam Hussein! Of course, Haiti doesn't have any oil!! Where do you and I stand with such personal issues as divorce or gay rights or criminal acts of murder or abortion? Popular opinion of the day would say that such people might as well "go down" for their acts of immorality! But Jesus the Messiah would say "let him/her who is without sin be the one to cast the first stone!"

To confess Jesus as Messiah is to live a life OUT OF NEUTRAL -- to live a commitment to Christ's resurrection without looking back to yesterday's rage ... to live a commitment to Christ that forgives 'til death do us part ... to live a commitment to God's love by treating every person as a loved one ... to confess God as Creator and then creatively care for every living thing on this earth ... to confess Christ as Messiah by serving, rather than being served, and offering one's life as a ransom for the least and the lost ... thereby helping to transform & redeem a greedy and hungry world STILL LOOKING FOR ITS REAL MESSIAH!

AMEN.



Pentecost XVII  
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo  
September 22, 1996  
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

## **“BEYOND COMPARISON!”**

*But the owner replied, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” Matt. 20:13-15*

My dear Glenwood friends: this last month has been one of many comparisons, hasn't it? *“What do you think of his preaching? I think he's a little too loud at times; I think he gets a little too exuberant and spirited; I really like a little of his fire? Well, how do you think he shapes up in comparison to Akerman and Imhoff? Well, I think he's a little younger than Akerman; and he's certainly not as “rotound” as Imhoff. I wonder what he's planning to do after his Interim at Glenwood??”* And these are probably the mild statements; there may be some really juicy comparisons still going on about Peter Martyn.

What would we do if we didn't have the ability to make comparisons? We compare lovers and spouses, boyfriends and girlfriends, Lutherans and Catholics, homes on our street to the ones on the next street; the way our church looks and acts to the way others look and act in the neighborhood or whole city. We compare our occupations with others' professions; and we're constantly comparing social status and racial identity and all kinds of other superficial human characteristics. Although many of us talk about being “independent,” much of what we say is just talk -- because we often want to belong to the same clubs, vote for the same party, buy the same kinds of clothes, support the same teams, frequent the same restaurants, and aspire to the same kind of leisure activities and travel. By and large, we are constantly making comparisons so we won't be too different from anyone else.

Comparisons, comparisons, comparisons. To live in this society is to be making constant comparisons before making many decisions or judgements. Obviously, that's not all bad; God wants us to have discerning minds and spirits so that we don't make inappropriate decisions. Many times making comparisons helps us reach the right conclusions. But sometimes in the process of making comparisons we find ourselves concentrating only on secondary things or less essential things, esp. when it comes to our faith & our church.

For instance, why are you at Glenwood? Is it simply because your family has always belonged to this church? That's not all bad, but hopefully there's more to Glenwood than just a long-family-tree. Are you at Glenwood simply because of some former pastor ... or some fellowship program that once was very successful? Are you here because Glenwood once had a great youth program ... or because it has a gymnasium? Maybe you're here because of it's good music program. Again, none of these are bad, but are they the real **COMPARATIVE VALUE** of our faith?

Have you ever asked: “Is Jesus Christ at the center of this congregation’s life, vitality and ministry?” Does this church confess God as Creator and Lord of the Universe ... or do we just mouth those words each week in a creed? Does this church give proper emphasis to the Word and Sacraments ... or like others I have served, do we hear complaints about sermons & sacraments “taking too much time?!?” How much emphasis does this church give to the “undeserved grace of God;” or is our primary concern judging others who do not look as religious as we think they should? Is preaching, teaching & serving the emphasis of our mission; or do we get side-tracked with making comparisons about carpeting and paint colors and church suppers and how “so & so” was dressed last Sunday?? Is the power of the Holy Spirit alive and “in charge” of the all proceedings at Glenwood; or do we let our egos and our hurt feelings and our prejudices or our pettiness determine how we will talk around here??

I hope this is not the first time that these questions have been asked. Because these are the essential questions of our faith and of the church’s life. And with all these questions, you will find very little difference in the answers whether at Glenwood or St. Mark’s Episcopal or Collingwood Presbyterian or Warren AME. Because these questions get to the real heart of our faith and the church’s mission. But so often we are like the “church lady” from Saturday Night Live: we only compare the superficial stuff ... the way the church looks, the way people dress, who belongs to what, the way the preacher postures himself in prayer, and all the other “secondary comparisons” of faith & church life.

That was the precise situation of the parable before us today. A land-owner had a job in his vineyard that needed to be done pronto. He went out to hire workers. He found several who needed work. And he hired them and promised them a fair day’s wage. The workers were thrilled. Instead of being idle, they were going to be given a full day’s wage ... enough to buy food & necessities for their families for one day. It was a very generous offer--just to be given the work. Well, the day went on ... and the owner kept going out and getting more laborers. Each time he promised a full day’s wage. Even up to the last hour, he made the same promise.

But when the earlier workers found out that the later workers got the same fair wage--they were furious. They began to grumble and begrudge their pay. They felt cheated, even though they had all agreed to the same fair day’s wage. They then became angry with the owner’s generosity. And we know why, don’t we??? **BECAUSE THEY BEGAN TO MAKE COMPARISONS!** Once they began comparing themselves to others, they became entrapped with envy, jealousy, rudeness, arrogance and anger. Once they began making comparisons, they totally forgot the original agreement (covenant): their full satisfaction, their joy and good fortune in being given a fair day’s wage!!

Now how many of us here today identify with those earlier workers?? Like them, most of us feel they got jipped! We feel that way because the world has imprisoned us in making comparisons. And once we start comparing the way I act toward you verses someone else... or how you did for so and so but

didn't do for another ... then we've allowed the devil to come upon us: because we **WE BEGIN TO FEEL JEALOUS, ENVIOUS AND EVEN HATEFUL**. It's the basic mentality of the world: **I'm gonna get mine even if I have to cause others hurt**. In Toledo, we've even seen some who don't care **EVEN** if the company or community goes down the tube -- just so they come out getting theirs. There's one basic point to this parable, as with all parables: **GOD SEEKS TO BE GENEROUS TO ALL WHO ARE FAITHFUL**. And once we overlook his generosity, we are getting on a downhill slippery slope of life.

The situation reminds me of the legendary story of the two brothers who lived in perfect harmony for many years. One day a magic genie appeared to them and said: *"Ah so, you have done so well and been so kind, it is only fitting that you reap great rewards."* Then he told them to ask for anything and it would be theirs. And just before he disappeared, he added a final condition, saying: *"The wonderful thing is that only one brother can make the wish, but the other brother will receive double for whatever is wished for! But the offer is only good til sundown"*

The brothers were ecstatic; they were really gone to cash in! Now what should they wish for?? The sky was the limit. Would they go for money or for things?? The possibilities were endless. But all the while they were thinking, the "wishing brother" was having second thoughts. Even though he would get whatever he wished for, it really bothered him that his brother would get **"double his take."** **He began making comparisons. And you know what entered his heart: greed, envy, jealousy, wickedness.** The sun was about to set and he still hadn't made his wish. His brother seized him and began to shake him demanding: *"Come On, Come On, Make the Wish!!"* But the "wishing brother" kept on hesitating. Finally, the other brother grabbed him by the throat and yelled, *"Make the Wish or I'll choke you to death!!"*

Gasping for air, the "wishing brother" blurted out: *"I wish, I wish to be blind in one eye!"* (Obviously meaning his brother was now blind in both eyes.) So goes the power of making comparisons! We've all been there and done that, haven't we: **we start comparing and all of a sudden we begin to feel envy and jealousy and mean-spiritedness and the desire to do wrong to the other!!** And we wonder why there's so much violence and hatred in our world: we are bombarded daily by advertising and television which compels us to constantly make comparisons.

Well, this parable makes clear that "making comparisons" is not the game plan in the Kingdom of God. Where God is in charge, he sets the standard and makes the rules. And he has but one rule: **TO BE AS GENEROUS TO THE LAST AS HE IS TO THE FIRST!!** His generosity goes beyond fairness ... beyond a labor mentality. He has made a profound promise: he will treat every one of his faithful ... every worker in his vineyard **EQUALLY!** Because he knows and we know none of us deserves such generosity. **But God doesn't give according to what we deserve, but according to what we need.** All the workers in his vineyard, regardless of how long we

work or how long we live ... all need to be blessed with a fair day's wage ... with enough to meet our daily needs. When we make comparisons, He sees how stingy and self-interested we become, and he says: *"I will show you what real generosity is ... I will pour out my abundant love and kindness even though none of you deserve it in the least!!"*

Is it any wonder we baptize infants in our tradition?? Even before the newborn child can begin to conceive the difference between right and wrong, the fulness of divine life is poured into his/her frail human flesh. God doesn't reward us in proportion to our human goodness or achievements; he rewards us in proportion to his unconditional love and mercy! AND THAT REWARD IS BEYOND COMPARISON!! There is nothing or no one in this world who measures up to God's generosity. So our mission as Christians is not to come to church and try to compare ourselves or anyone else to God's level of goodness! We will all fall short of His glorious generosity! Nor is our mission to grumble and whine when we feel that we haven't received our fair share of God's goodness. God has sought to be equally generous to us all; it's the demons and diseases and greed of this world that often cut us short.

In fact, unlike the grumbling laborers in the parable, God doesn't owe us a thing!! Quite to the contrary -- we owe God! We owe God a full day's work at whatever wage God gives. And we all know there are many who not worked a day, yet these somehow demand all the rewards. Well, God can't reward any servant who doesn't make himself/herself available. And the church is the place God has established for his labor pool. Yet somehow some figure without ever showing up here at all that they deserve the full equality of the kingdom!! The facts: every one of us owes God by at least being present! And thankfully, he always seeks other workers in order to make the work load easier for all of us ... and in order to assure that we'll get the job done. Yet how tragic that we grumble when God simply seeks to give us an equal opportunity--he wants us all to see the harvest finished ... he wants to hear our praise and glory when we help Him finish the job!!

So how do we want to be seen?? As people who whine and complain about His generosity?? As people who think more about our wallets and our purses than doing the job that God has called us to do: **HELPING TO SAVE SINNERS, SERVE SINNERS & OFFER HIS GENEROUS FORGIVENESS TO SINNERS!!** Will our faith simply be "Making Comparisons" about the superficial realities of religion [like hymns & pieties & dress codes & styles of worship or as my black friends say: *"will we worry more about the gravy than the real meat of worship:"* worrying more about enthusiasm than true consecration to His Word!] Or will our faith be a reflection of God's faith in us ... a faith which GOES BEYOND COMPARISON ... by simply giving and giving and giving to the degree that God has blessed us. In short, like God in his vineyard, will we be found sharing generously with all who are willing to work and are in need ... because every worker in the vineyard needs to know that his or her contribution to the harvest was of great value!?!? **AMEN.**