

PENTECOST XV
Church of the Master - Troy
September 15, 1974

"DOING WHAT COMES UN-NATURALLY" .

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled;
and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."
(Luke 14:11)

At the World University games in Moscow, the United States basketball team led the Cubans 98 - 76 with ninety seconds to play. A scuffle for the ball threw players to the floor. . . and suddenly, the whole Cuban team ran on to the court swinging fists and folding chairs.

The International Herald Tribune reported that a player from Providence College appeared to be the only U.S. player who escaped unscathed. He climbed over a barricade and sat down among the spectators.

Would he be justified by the texts before us? Is the Christian to be a spectator, or to come out swinging? Let's leave that one hanging for a moment.

Last year I was the "in charge" person for my fellow pastor-brothers 25th anniversary of ordination. Among the many responsibilities, I designated the 50 places at the head table. I must admit I went totally against the text for this day. Instead of following Jesus, I followed the directions of Amy Vanderbilt. The prestigious guests sat nearest the honored pastor - the lesser guests sat at the end of the table.

When Sue and I were arranging our marriage, we were highly advised by family members to choose "very fine" china. We had decided upon corning ware china. We were told that such china would surely not be proper in the pastor's parsonage. I'd best not divulge my response to that!

Last Friday night as we were schuttling Sue's sister to Detroit Metro Airport, a jet-set man in front of us became very impatient for a parking place. He rammed his car in reverse, backed into ours, and recklessly drove away. Seeing him a few minutes later, I politely told him I valued my family more than he did. His response was a half peace sign (inquire from your teenagers if you don't know what that is).

Many of you know of my initial reluctance to come to Detroit. I'm sure my major reason was due to the mentality of violence and hatred that exists in this area. I am not only talking about the homicides in the inner-city -- I'm talking about the murder mentality that exists in our own neighborhoods. Whether white or black, the underlying mentality of this whole area is one of fear, distrust, and hatred -- all of which lead to violence.

What is the point of all these pearl-like examples strung together? Quite simply, they all contradict the Christian message before us. Each example represents one of our many NATURAL tendencies.

The Cubans were losing - they took revenge. Paul says: Never take revenge - live at peace with all men.

At the Anniversary dinner, I reinforced the American obsession of prestige. Every day we fight for that top spot - and lo and behold, I even set it up that way in the church. And Jesus says: For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.

The china -- and the word of the world is - IMPRESS THOSE PARISHONERS. After all, that's the real reason for being in the ministry - to make a good impression. I'm expecting my walking papers any day cause we're still using the corning-ware china.

The airport incident - the mentality of fear and hatred -- and Paul says in Romans today: Do not let evil defeat you; instead, conquer evil with good.

What's the point? Namely, we're trapped! We're imprisoned by our natural desires -- by what everyone else thinks -- by the latest Madison Avenue pitch -- we're caught in the vice-grips of the latest vogue.

And then Jesus comes along with a pitch which really puts us in a bind; For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled; and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Not do we only have the struggle of keeping up with the next guy, but then Jesus comes along and makes us feel guiltier for DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY IN society.

Jesus says: Do what comes UN-naturally. He actually wants us to be NON-conformists.

Obviously, Jesus is not calling us to be spectators - to watch the struggle of life from the bleachers. The Christian lifestyle is not one of religious seclusion. Faith does not give us a head-for-the-hills kind of religion.

On the other hand, Jesus is not calling us to take battle stations - to come out swinging. Onward Christian Soldiers may be a rip-roaring hymn, but its militaristic images do great violence to Jesus' teachings.

Jesus in today's gospel is calling upon us to be AGGRESSIVELY HUMBLE -- not passive, but aggressive in our humility. . . willing to take a firm stand to do HIS THING - which is often the UN-natural and even the Un-popular thing among the elite of society.

So the question of the day is: Can we live by his aggressive humility? I don't know what your first answer is, but mine BY NATURE is NO. Because BY NATURE, I am not aggressively

humble - by nature I tend to be aggressively arrogant. And I believe I am not only describing the Peter Principle - I am describing the People Principle. For instance, when struck most of us by nature want to strike back. By nature, we covet positions of prestige -- we often select a pompous surrounding to the plain. Jesus says - when you give a party, ask the poor, the crippled, the lame etc. By Nature, our guest list rarely includes many of these.

In fact, when I suggested the Altar of Thanksgiving project to our Outreach Committee, the first reaction I received was: why should we give to them - they don't deserve it. . . Yes, So often our first reaction is to lump all poor people together calling them a bunch of leeches - By nature, we sure like to put ourselves at the head of the table, don't we?

It should be obvious. By nature, I am NOT a non-conformist - and neither are most of you. By nature, I am not very humble -- and can I be so arrogant as to say that such is true for most of us.

Well then, is there any hope for us? Can we bury our obsessions with pride, prestige, and power? Is this just a pious platitude of Jesus, or can we really humble ourselves? We've all seen people who play the humble role-- and we all know that such performances are just other forms of arrogance. So - what can we do?

We must rely upon what's already been done for us. We must rely upon the action of God. Namely, in Christ's death, he absorbed our curses, our hard-heartedness, our haughtiness, our ignobility, and yes, our vengeful acts. In baptism, all this has been buried with Christ. And in that same baptism, we have been offered new life - we call it resurrected life in the Christian family.

And that's where we stand. God gives us a choice each day of our lives. We can accept

his gift of renewing love in order that we may transform others with it. Or, we can play the old natural game of CONFORMATION (not Confirmation) -- conforming to doing what comes naturally, which includes jealousy, hatred, arrogance, vengefulness, and violence.

My friends, I struggle with these choices every day ... I'm sure you do as well. Each day I'm tempted to play CONFORMATION . . . and each day, to one degree or another, I find myself playing that (expletive deleted) game.

But I know, and you know, that ultimately there is no exaltation in that game. For that game lasts only a lifetime -- and to play it successfully is really a grind.

And so each day I find myself wanting more and more to accept the gift God has given me -- the gift of forgiving love for being trapped by CONFORMATION. And with his gift, I can again be aggressively humble. I can again disarm my weapons of arrogance - jealousy - violence and the rest. And with each of those experiences, I can be assured that with God's gift of aggressive humility APPLIED - there will be a final exaltation in my life. Not because I've done anything alone - but because of the WAY he's given me in Christ.

Today - everyday - God calls us to RALLY round his table, NOT worrying about seating patterns. Just rallying around his table with his people. And as we do so, he says that we'll want to share what we receive NOT only with our friends, our relations, our rich neighbors -- but he says we'll want to share that gift with the poor, the crippled, the lame - yes, with everyone.

Not because we have to - not because it's a project of the pastors -- but because its the way God has shown us to humble ourselves in order that we might be exalted.

Amen



THEME: God's grace frees us from obsessions with the commandments of men, in order that we might rejoice in our possibilities to fulfill God's command to love him and neighbor as self.

PENTECOST XV

Luth Church of the Master, Troy
Sept. 19, 1976 (RALLY SUNDAY)

"DOES IT REALLY MATTER?"

"Jesus answered: 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites in these words: 'This people pays me lip-service, but their heart is far from me: Their worship of me is in vain, for they teach as doctrines the commandments of men.' You neglect the commandment of God, in order to maintain the tradition of men.'" Mark 7:6-7

Isn't it amazing -- the story of life's priorities has not changed too much over the last couple thousand years.

The issue before Jesus on that day was without a doubt an issue that almost all parents in this room have faced with their kids -- the issue of WASHING YOUR HANDS before you eat.

Jesus' disciples were undoubtedly very hungry. They knew that the ceremonial law demanded that you wash your hands before eating. And Jesus knew this law very well also.

But evidently, the disciples were very hungry and just didn't take the time to wash their hands. And we know how the story goes on. The Pharisees and lawyers wasted no time -- this was a chance to discredit Jesus and his followers. A chance to condemn Jesus -- a chance to take a good swipe at him, and thereby show how much superior they were!!

Obviously - there is a great amount of common sense in the Hand Washing Law. It's a good rule. Not only does it look better to eat with clean hands, but it's obviously safer.

So ~~the~~ ~~story~~ ~~straight~~ ~~from~~ ~~the~~

The story is really saying

extensions of the law. And in focusing upon external matters, the Pharisees were turning away from facing the real issues raised by Jesus -- namely, the essence of human acceptance as shown by God in Jesus himself.

Yes, and much like the Pharisees of this story, you and I often imprison ourselves behind the bars of our own man-made rules. Yes - the oppression that we often suffer is a result of our fixation with our rules as contrasted to God's law for us. Much like the Pharisee, our intentions are good -- our rules are made for the purpose of cleaning up our families and society.

But it's in our application of the rules that we often blow it. Let me try to illustrate.

Almost all parents with teenagers have established a curfew time. And that it is not only good - but necessary. It is a way of helping young people understand that all of life is lived within limits. So, curfew codes are good man-made systems of discipline and protection.

But so often they are applied as if the curfew is more important than the person. So often we harp and harp about the external curfew, and fail to say anything about our internal love for the child. And so the message becomes one of REJECTION rather than one of DISCIPLINE.

I remember my days of teaching high school-- in the mid-60's the big issue was the hair code. The rule at Tremper High School in Kenosha was that if the hair touches any part of the ear -- the person was sent home, and not allowed to return to school until he had cut his hair.

Obviously, there was some common sense for this hair code -- good grooming is a discipline which can make or break a person in the professional world. But so much time, energy

~~beginning~~ -- there's nothing wrong with rules and regulations like WASHING HANDS BEFORE EATING. In fact, these rules are very good -- and often very necessary!

But you know and I know the problems they create when they become CAUSE for condemning another person. And it's at that moment that we must ask ourselves: DOES THIS MANMADE LAW REALLY MATTER THAT MUCH?? And that's exactly what Jesus was trying to impress upon the Pharisees and lawyers.

Yes - let's face it - the gospel story before us has been played over and over again on the stage of our lives. Much like the Pharisees, most of us have our own little pet-code --- our own little man-made rule which not only gets more emphasis than God's law of love -- but often we condemn others by that same rule of ours.

My little man-made rule is what might be called the COOKS-CODE. As Sue well knows, I'm obsessed with crumbs on the counter top. And how easy I can put others down if they leave crumbs on the counter top.

Much like washing hands before a meal, clean counter tops make eating more enjoyable and sanitary. But not at the cost of fracturing human relationships. Crumbs just aren't that important -- yet, how often I make my little code on crumbs MORE IMPORTANT than God's code on love.

THOSE CRUMBS

And DOES IT REALLY MATTER THAT MUCH?? You and I know that ~~they~~ matters -- BUT NOT THAT MUCH.

Is it any wonder that Jesus says - this people pays me lip service, but their heart is far from me.

Jesus knew that the Pharisees had a very thorough understanding of God's laws of love and justice. But he also knew that these keepers-of-the-law had a tendency to emphasize externals -- to get hung up in their own

and nit-picking was involved in this code, that the students clearly SAW how shallow and superficial it all was.

A man-made rule had totally superseded the whole educational process. The hair code had become oppressive, and the whole educational environment was suffering. The administration was paying lip-service to education.

The same kind of imprisonment so often occurs in the church. How often both parents and the church establish a rule that children have to be confirmed at a certain age. So often this is done without thinking about the real purpose of catechism - to instill and nurture the faith.

Likewise, we all know about the dress-codes and what might be called the altar-codes of the church. All of these are man-made rules which add beauty and decorum to worship. But, oh how these rules can become stumbling blocks and walls that block out God's spirit. And when asked, DO ALL THESE THINGS REALLY MATTER THAT MUCH? We know the answer is, NOT REALLY.

We know this because we know that it was not God's intent to imprison us. As necessary as these man-made rules are, they can completely block out God's acceptance of us IF WE ALLOW SUCH A THING TO HAPPEN.

God has given us a greater gem than any of these man-made stones. He has accepted us through the love of Christ; and we CAN now share that jewel of love as our first priority.

When our man-made rules cause oppression and rejection, When we see that our human laws are causing us to lose touch with any part of the human family -- we then realize why God's commandment must be implanted even deeper within us.

Don't let us be like...

And God has planted his law of love deep within us. For in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ -- God has implanted his personal love within the hearts of humankind.

That resource is within all of us -- so whether we're oppressed by our own rules or by our evil actions - we can always turn back to God, to his church, to his people AND BE ASSURED OF HIS ~~ACCEPTANCE~~ PRIORITY

AMEN

FOR US - HIS
ACCEPTANCE OF US -
AND OUR ACCEPTANCE OF ONE
ANOTHER EVEN WHEN WE
HAVE FAILED OUR MAN-MADE RULES.

PENTECOST XV

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
September 7, 1980 (Rally Day)

"ON FINDING YOUR PLACE"

"He who exalts himself will be humbled, and
he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Luke 14:11

What is the real measure of our lives?? Is it
the status that we've attained in the community?
Is it the recognition that we receive from
others? Is it the size of our holdings? Is it
the location of our homes? Is it the number and
models of cars that we drive? Is it the appearance
of our balance sheets? OR -- is it the inner
quality of our lives ... our peacefulness as well
as our concern for others? What is the real
measure????

We all know the right answer, don't we? From
the perspective of faith -- everyone in this room
knows the correct answer. We all know that the
inner quality of life is the real measure of life.
And yet -- even though we all know this, we also
know that most of us live contrary to this value
as THE REAL MEASURE. For most of us, the inner
quality of life takes a back seat to the
outward measures of life.

In short, we are all involved in the ^{big}scramble --
the scramble for bigger, and better positions
and places. Jesus' parable of the quest for
status rings as true today as it did in his day.
Whether spoken or unspoken, we all live knowing
that the secret of survival is often a matter of
scrambling for a better place ~~under the sun~~. It's
the game of life -- constantly being played out
all around us, every day.

Every leaf on every branch of every tree is
situated where it is because each individual
leaf is simply reaching up for light WITHOUT
which it cannot live. Standing there so quietly
and gracefully in the forest, every tree is
engaged in a life and death struggle with every
other tree for survival -- for its place in the sun

The longing to be Number One is a law very basic to nature. When John and Jane bring home their first report cards from school, mother and dad ask, "Did you get all A's?" When John goes out for sports he learns to believe that "Winning is not just something ... it is everything!" When John and Jane go off for college they make no bones about being unwilling to sit in the classroom seats of just any old college. The quest for the chief places -- the chief seats -- the chief positions is what it's all about.

Yes - by and large that's what we make the real measure of our lives. We live in a highly competitive world. We sit down to breakfast and have our choice of the "Breakfast of champions" or a cereal that makes "the total difference." And then throughout the day we are bombarded to settle for nothing less than the best, the most, the finest, the greatest, until we finally go to sleep lulled to slumber by the most supportive mattress and the most effective sleeping pill that money can buy.

It is difficult to be human without getting caught up in the quest for FINDING A BETTER PLACE. And surely we must understand that such human initiative is not all bad. Or as one commentator on today's text says: "Someone has to be in the chief position.. so there's nothing wrong with being on the top." Jesus is not forbidding anyone from being in a better place ... or from being on the top.

But what he is attacking is THAT ~~MEASURE OF LIFE~~ ^{LIFESTYLE} which commits itself TO NOTHING MORE than jockeying and scrambling for better places. It was that kind of lifestyle that Jesus was observing among the religious of his day. He was observing religious people who consumed all their energies in "getting into higher places."

These so-called religious people had no time for serving God or anyone else because their lives were totally spent in devising ways of getting greater honor, recognition, and glory.

All of us know the kind of people that Jesus was describing. They are the pushy people. The ones forever bent on upward mobility. The ones always needing the last word. The ones who obnoxiously scramble to be first and thereby in our minds are quickly ~~estimated to be~~ *be come* last.

We all know people who have committed themselves to self-exaltation. But the question is whether we know that we are among them. Because the facts of faith and the facts of life ARE THAT EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US HAS BEEN AMONG THEM ... WE HAVE EACH TAKEN OUR TURN TO PUSH AND SHOVE SOMEONE ELSE ASIDE AS WE HAVE SCRAMBLED FOR CENTER STAGE.

Obviously -- that's not the kind of Number One person that Christ desires for his followers. But as I said before -- he is not opposed to our being "Number One" -- he is not opposed to our being in better places. But once we've arrived at a better place as a Christian -- the challenge for greater responsibility, greater servanthood, and greater humility comes with such position.

It's that kind of number one person that Jesus Christ calls us to be -- to be "Number One" like Him.

In the life of Jesus Christ we see the perfect illustration of first-class, top rank humility. That humility was not weakness, but rather tremendous strength.

It was the strength which did not need to put down people of lower rank, but rather to lift them up and give them new hope. It was the strength which could say -- when you give a feast do not only invite your friends and brothers of the same rank. But invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind -- because they cannot repay you. They are the ones who need to be lifted up.

Yes, Jesus Christ ~~could be~~ *is the pattern of* number one -- ~~and yet~~ *because* ~~not~~ *his* ~~be~~ exclusive in any way, shape, or manner.

And that's the kind of Lord that every one is
t his room needs to find a place for ... a Lord
who invites & offers an equal place to everyone
• • • a Lord who forgives everyone equally • • •
• • • a Lord who serves everyone
equally • • • a Lord who humbled himself
in order that we might be exalted before God.

Ultimately - there's only place well-worth
finding in this world ... and that's ~~an equal~~ a
place at the Table of our Lord. Because that's
the only place in this world where we don't
have to scramble for position and shove other
people aside. It's the only place in this world
where status doesn't mean a darn thing; rich are
poor, and poor are rich. It's the only place
where you and I are accepted just as we are,
without any need for pretense or piety....
without any need for cosmetics or clout.

Yes - thank God for finding us a place where
we can genuinely be humble... where we don't
have to play any games or wear any facades ...
where we can let go of all of our phoniness and
fears, our guilts and garbage.

Yes, thank God there is one dinner table on
this earth where we can *joyfully* humble ourselves
and be assured that we will be exalted by the
love of God.

And even as we thank God for this place,
let us pray that God will help us take this
Table with us into our homes, our offices,
our meeting and working places. Yes, God help
us find a place for the Lord's Table in our
daily lives.

Above all, God help us to be like Christ after
we have left this Table -- to be "Number One" like
Him: people whose lives are measured NOT ONLY
BY OUTWARD APPEARANCES, but by that inner quality
which seeks to serve and love all who are in
need, regardless of their status or positions
in life.

AMEN

PENTECOST 15

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
Sept. 1 and 4 (Labor Day Weekend)
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"DIVINE ETIQUETTE"

"He who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Luke 14:11

We live in a world which is very conscious of social and cultural etiquette. Social etiquette is such an obsession with some people that they literally get sick worrying about it. I have known many bridal mothers who have worried so much about the seating for the guests, and other wedding details that they have had no time to even get to know their future son-in-law. The concern for status and power and prestige and position can so easily overshadow the building up of a relationship of love. Proper etiquette can be the cause for many sleepless nights when planning life's major passages.

Please don't get me wrong -- I am not against social etiquette (in fact, some couples could stand to do a little reading on the subject). Social and cultural etiquette have their proper place -- they help give order and guidance to our social environments. And most of us prefer order to chaos. But that same etiquette can also spawn some of the world's greatest divisiveness... and jealousy ... and resentfulness.

We all know that the daily newspaper could not survive without the society page. I'm certain there are many people who read that page before anything else in the paper. And like it or not -- we all know the unwritten but understood rules of that page. Social and cultural etiquette makes clear that there are some people "who are in," and the majority "who are out" on that page. We may not like those subtle rules of social etiquette, but they remain a fact of our cultural fabric.

The danger for the body of Christ, is when that social and cultural etiquette becomes the rule and order for our ministry and relationships in the church. And that was exactly the situation confronted by Jesus in the Jewish-Christian community reflected by St Luke. The body of

Christ -- the Christian community -- had been depreciated into just another social order -- it had become just another reflection of cultural etiquette.

The energies and concerns of the leaders and people in those Christian communities were no longer on ministry, or serving, or compassion. The whole essence of community life was an obsession with cultural etiquette -- people were merely concerned about jockeying and scrambling for better places ... for more prominence ... for greater glory and credit ... for more recognition and status. So Jesus pulls no punches -- he tells the parable of the places of honor at the marriage feast. As with all of his parables -- he was illustrating a very graphic point -- that the community of faith had been converted into just another social club -- where the main aim of membership was purely self-exaltation!!

Please don't get Jesus wrong -- he has no argument with a social or professional pecking order. He realizes that there must be chiefs in the world -- he realizes that there is nothing inherently wrong with being on the top or wanting a better place in society or the corporation. But he does not want that mentality to become the purpose and essence of the church's life and ministry. Social and cultural etiquette are not the prescribed order for the people of God.

That was the game plan of the Pharisees -- they had turned God's holy banquet temple into just another exclusive club. They had devised guest lists which were totally status and rank oriented -- excluding people from God's kingdom who did not fit their prescription of perfection and righteousness. They spent all their time deciding who would get the seats of honor, and obviously had no time to even consider Christ's ministry to the poor and maimed and lame and blind. The Pharisees were too busy fanagling with internal politics and power struggles -- they had no time for the ministry that Christ had come them to.

That is always the risk and the temptation of the church in the world -- to merely adopt the social and cultural order and etiquette of the day -- to just become another exclusive club of society.

But there is another kind of etiquette that God has offered to you and me through Jesus Christ. He has offered us a governing principle and power that is not exclusive or demonic or divisive -- his governing principle is inclusive and embracing of everyone. No one is overlooked by divine etiquette -- because it is a power which reveals itself in humility. And humility is a great strength, not an extreme weakness (as it has often been defined in history).

Humility is not being wishy-washy (as it has often been characterized). Humility is not a matter of silently walking around with your hands folded and never taken action. Humility is offering up your life as an instrument of peace WITHOUT DEMANDING ALL KINDS OF CREDIT FOR DOING IT.

Jesus humbled himself by sacrificing his life for others. And that's always the focus of humility -- the needs of others rather than your own needs of gratification. Jesus didn't tell his disciples to go out and tell everyone how humble he was; he didn't have to tell his disciples to tell everyone what a good guy he was. They experienced his example of humility by seeing him sacrifice without asking for credit. There was no exclusive list for whom Jesus was sacrificing -- he had compassion and concern for everyone. Likewise - he wanted everyone to live by divine etiquette -- to humble themselves for the sake of others through sacrifice and service.

Jesus Christ has turned the tables of etiquette upside down. The key words for social and cultural etiquette are rank, power, status, position, or always being concerned about yourself. The key word for Divine etiquette is just the opposite -- humility -- being concerned about the needs of others. In short, God seeks to empty etiquette of all of its arrogance.

So as faithful Christians -- we must ask ourselves: what is the focus of our faith?? Likewise, as a body of Christ, what are we concerned about? Is our concern merely one of social and cultural etiquette -- is our focus of mission merely upon rank & power & position??

Or do we reflect the principle of Divine etiquette -- are we seeking to be a servant ministry -- where we show especially concern for the powerless and poor, the impotent and the isolated?? Do we see our Christian identity and ministry as merely a matter of jockeying and scrambling for better seats of honor -- or is this a household of faith where people genuinely give of themselves because of their deep love and conviction to God and others??

There is no easy answer to any of those questions?? In fact, if we're honest -- we know we can't answer one way or the other. As saints as well as sinners -- we are always operating with both cultural and divine etiquette as the powers behind us. But the real question is -- in which direction are we showing the greatest growth???

I believe this congregation is consciously seeking to grow toward Divine Etiquette -- toward a real servant ministry of others. Numerous evidences could be cited -- growth in our recent VCS, growth in Bible studies, growth in committee accountability, etc. Possibly the Search Committee best exemplifies the spirit of divine etiquette. After 5 months of diligent researching and interviewing-- the Committee is still not willing to make any snap decisions. We are concerned about the best potential leadership for our educational ministry programs.

There has had to be real humility in this process -- a willingness to sacrifice ... a constant need to remember our focus of serving the whole congregation. The guidance for this kind of ministry does not come from social or cultural sources of etiquette -- it comes from Christ himself. From the one who sacrificed himself to show HOW INCLUSIVELY AND COMPLETELY HE LOVES US.

It is only Jesus Christ who has an open-ended invitation to his banquet table. There is no special guest list -- there are no exclusive seats of honor -- there is no divisive or jealous spirit around this table. Christ invites each of us with the same forgiving spirit -- in order that we might TOO BE HUMBLD AND BRING GREATER HARMONY INTO HIS WORLD AS WE LEAVE HIS TABLE TO SERVE OUR FELLOWMAN!

AMEN

PENTECOST XV
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
September 20, 1987
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"IT'S NOT EASY!!"

"I appeal to you therefore, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Romans 12:1-2 "But Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.' Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any person would follow after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" Matthew 16:24-25

Possibly some of you have heard of the young college grad who was eager to make it to the top. He went to a well-known millionaire executive and asked what the first reason was for his great success. The businessman answered without hesitation: "Hard work ... and more hard work!" The college grad paused for a long time ... and then asked: "How about the second reason for your great success!"

We all know that anything worthwhile in life takes a lot of hard work and energy -- but we are inclined by our very nature to often want "the easy way." Last week, Denny Hartman beautifully described life in the kingdom of God as "NOT FAIR!" In short his message was: "Bad things still happen to good Christian people!" Life in the kingdom of God is not always beautiful, bountiful, and blessed. God never promised a rose garden -- that faithfulness to him would yield fairness from others: FAITHFULNESS ONLY OFFERS THE ASSURANCE OF LOVE AND MERCY!

This week - God not only says that life in the kingdom can be VERY UNFAIR; he also says that IT WILL NEVER BE EASY! It requires constant dedication, self-denial, determination, and never-ending hard work! Now how's that for a one/two punch?? First, Not Fair! And now, Not Easy!! What in the world are we all doing here today?? Who wants to be a part of a kingdom that is NOT FAIR and demands HARD WORK! I suppose if we were really honest with ourselves -- we'd all answer: none of us!!

We all swoon and quickly swallow the first eleven chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans. Here St. Paul explicates with passion and profundity the greatness of God's grace to us. "There is nothing in all creation which will separate us from the love of God in Christ!" But finally in chapter 12 - Paul moves from God's mercies to the disciples' ministries! "Now, therefore, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Do not be conformed to the world around you ... but be transformed by the renewal of your minds ... to do what is good, acceptable and perfect."

In short, God not only expects us to accept the "unfairness" of life -- he also expects constant efforts of renewal and willingness to change! Is it any wonder that nearly 95% of Americans say they believe in God ... but less than 10% are really dedicated to "doing God's will in the world!" We all want to receive grace upon grace upon grace -- but when it comes to surrender, sacrifice, and suffering ... that's someone else's business. Is it any wonder that Peter says to Jesus: "Forbid it, Lord, that these things should happen to you!" Certainly the Messiah shall not encounter any tragedies or tribulations ... his cannot be the tough way! Not God's Son! After all, royalty is supposed to be guaranteed the easy way! Royalty always inherits the abundant life!

So without hesitation, Jesus calls Peter, "Satan." Because Satan always defines religion as three easy, magical steps to supernatural stardom: 1) turn stones into bread; 2) leap off the pinnacle without getting hurt, and 3) bow down and worship me. It's obvious, Satan is not a red-suited character carrying a pitch fork. Satan is the guy next door wearing a \$400 Hart/Schafner/Marx who's saying with great polish and piety that religion always yields instant success, instant results, and instant gratification.

Quite to the contrary, today's texts define true religion. And True Religion has little to do with the "fair way" or the "easy way." True religion does not offer three, easy magical steps to supernatural security. The principles of true religion (and esp. true Christianity) are no different from anything else in life that has its ultimate value and lasting worth. Jesus says, "If any person would be my disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Those are the principles of a great religion ... of a supernatural faith ... of an everlasting life: SELF-DENIAL and CROSS BEARING. There is no easier way ... the way of true faithfulness is always hard work!

Upon a recent visit to the Washington monument, the guide was overheard announcing that there would be a two-hour wait to ride the elevator to the top of the monument. However, with a smile on his face, he said: "There is no wait for anyone willing to take the stairs." Intelligent people know that this reality is true for all worthwhile endeavors -- you can accomplish any goal if you are willing to "climb the stairs" ... to work hard ... to make the effort. Whether it's business, politics, or religion, the same principle applies.

During the Los Angeles Open Golf Tournie a few years ago, the legendary Arnold Palmer was interviewed while practicing on the putting green. "Arnie, what do you feel is wrong to make you play so poorly the last couple of years?" Without looking up, Arnie answered directly: "I haven't been hard enough on myself, that's all." Two hours after that interview, the same reporter came back to find Palmer still practicing on the putting green. True greatness in anything demands hard work!

So often we who work in the church hear our friends and even family members say, "Why do you give so much of yourself? It's not worth it ... after all, they're not paying you for that much time and effort!" Nothing could be more rationally true! But God never said that serving him was a rational, well-paying reality! Quite to the point, self-denial is always an irrational and sacrificial reality! It goes against the grain of logical and rational behavior. If we were totally logical and rational, we wouldn't do a darn thing for anyone ... because other people rarely show adequate appreciation. But God has never said that our great efforts and time will lead to fantastic results. That's always been the truth of God's mission! The ends never justify the means -- we never give only because we expect big results. We give because it's the way of God ... it's the way, the truth, and the life of those who follow him ... it's what self-denial is all about.

I am often appalled by the stories that I hear of Christian parents who make the Christian faith into an "easy way" for their children. Obviously, religion is rarely on the top ten list for most kids. If given a choice, most kids will not choose to go to catechism or Sunday School. Children, just like their parents, prefer to take "the easy way." But God help us if we present spiritual realities as "choice options" to our children. That's what Paul was referring to when he said, "Do not be conformed to this world ... which always chooses the easy way." Sunday School, catechism, baptism, worship, tithing, like anything else which leads to renewal and transformation, always requires self-denial. And that's never easy -- but always necessary!

Yes, self-denial is often NOT FAIR and always NOT EASY, but it is God's expectation for us in light of all that he has given us. But like self-denial, a second principle also sees expression from the truly faithful: THEY BEAR THE CROSS! And likewise, that's never fair and never easy! What do I mean "we bear the cross." It means that we have a vision of life that goes beyond pure self-serving and leads to sacrifice and service of others. Or said differently, "bearing the cross" means we willingly and intentionally use our God given talents and gifts to their very best for others as well as ourselves.

Many of you may remember the nursery rhyme which tells of Solomon Grundy who was born on Monday, christened on Tuesday, and married on Wednesday; he took ill on Thursday, was worse on Friday, died on Saturday, and was buried on Sunday - and so the rhyme goes, that was the end of Mr. Grundy. Not a very life-giving biography. Mr. Grundy's story is too much like a volume of numbered pages with nothing printed on them. Mr. Grundy took up no cross to serve anyone in life ... he hardly even served himself. His life stood for little or nothing.

That's always what life yields without the cross -- life

becomes very one-dimensional ... very self-serving at most. It reminds me of the story of the man who was obsessed with the "green stuff" ... so obsessed he was that he had to be forever surrounded by green. He drove a green car, lived in a green house with a green picket fence and green sprayed roses in the garden. The house was decorated with green carpet and green drapes as well as green wallpaper. The man slept in a green bedroom, on a green bed, with green sheets and wore green pajamas. Eventually, he came ill -- suffering from gangrene -- and he took to his green bed in great distress. The family doctor was called and went upstairs while the man's wife waited anxiously for the prognosis. The physician seemed to be gone for a very long time, but finally came down, and the wife asked: "How's he doing, doctor?" And the doctor replied, "I don't know; I can't find him up there."

The man literally got lost in his green stuff. And don't we all know people who have been lost "in their obsession with green stuff." They never really touch life beyond themselves because they are too busy accumulating for themselves. They have become totally conformed to this world ... and they think that's really living. Dr. George Buttrick, a great American preacher, made reference in a sermon once to "the high standard of living" in America. He said, "It isn't high," "it certainly isn't a standard," and "it's the farthest thing from really living." It's never easy to "take up the cross" when we have become conformed to the green stuff of this world. As one dying man said, "I have tasted every tid bit of life around me; I have gorged myself on everything that I can touch; and now I die -- still hungry!"

"To take up your cross" means that you and I have a vision of life that goes beyond our own bellies. That's not easy, but it is what true religion is all about. Richard Leaky, a famous African archeologist, discussed in his book PEOPLE OF THE LAKE what separates man from the great apes. He concluded, it is not man's intelligence, but his generosity that makes him a unique creature. Only human beings have the ability to share. Only human beings are capable of genuine compassion. Only human beings are capable of laying down their lives for their friends. Only human beings have the capability "to take up the cross and follow Christ." Only human beings, and human beings alone, are not merely creatures of God, but can be children of God.

The great evangelist General Will Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, just a few months before his death wrote: "As long as women weep as they do now, I will fight; as long as children go hungry as they do now, I will fight; as long as men go in and out of prison as they do now, I will fight; as long as there is a drunkard, or poor lost girl on the streets, as long as there remains one dark soul without the light of God, I will fight the good fight of the love and mercy of God."

Can you imagine General Booth ever writing a book entitled LOOKING OUT FOR NUMBER ONE?? Can you imagine General Booth hiding out in Jim and Tammy's hideaway in Palm Springs? Can you imagine General Booth not using his God-given talents to their very best to serve the needs of others? "If anyone would be my disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." It's not easy ... it's a road that is less travelled in this world ... it's often lonely stairs rather than a crowded elevator ... but it's the way, the truth and the life of those who really want to make an ever-lasting difference in this world.

It's like the story of the bushman in Australia (certainly not Crocodile Dundee) who had claimed thousands of acres of desert by digging wells and irrigating ditches. He had made grass to grow where hot sands had smothered all plant life. And in the process, he had become a millionaire missionary in Australia.

Someone asked him, "Why do you keep on living out in that horrible, hot desert? You're now worth multi-millions. You don't have to work there any longer. Why don't you take life easy ... and have a good time?"

He answered: "God commissioned me like every other missionary to be in this place in his world. He commissioned me to turn this desert into a beautiful place for people to live. I am not working for money or millions. I am working for God. As long as he lets me work, I will keep turing the desert into green pastures."

It's not easy! But that's the mission of every disciple -- to turn the deserts of life into green pastures!

AMEN.

PENTECOST XV
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
September 16, 1990
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"MORE THAN SQUEEZABLY SOFT!"

"I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:1-2

How many of you remember Mr. Whipple? As many of us recall, Mr. Whipple was the dutiful, somewhat prissy, grocery store manager who never seemed to have anything to do but guard the Charmin tissue. And when shoppers came by the Charmin display - they could not resist squeezing the Charmin. So Whipple would say, "Don't squeeze the Charmin!" Finally, after many unsuccessful efforts to stop others from "squeezing the Charmin," even Mr. Whipple couldn't resist: He was caught in the act. He violates his own principles and conforms to the way of others around him.

Much like Mr. Whipple, Paul told the young church at Rome "not to conform to the world around them, but to be transformed by the renewal of their minds. The J. B. Phillips translations offers an even more irresistible version: "Do not let the world squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your minds from within."

To be faithful is to struggle with this Pauline statement for a life time. Because to live in this world is to be very much like Charmin tissue - squeezably soft. It means that we find the pressures and powers, the fads and formulas of our culture constantly squeezing us into this or that or something else. Much like Mr. Whipple - no matter how good our intentions - we find ourselves succumbing and conforming to all those cultural pressures.

It has always been most difficult to be a teenager in our world, esp. today when you have to wear certain name-Brand sneakers, certain fashion jeans, talk only about cool things (not church), wear your hair in specified styles, etc. etc. And what is the price for not doing this - rejection from the group. Some teens would like to believe that peer group conformity is true individuality - but we all know different. It's just like moms and dads having to belong to certain clubs, having to attend the right cocktail parties, having to live in the right neighborhoods, or having to own the latest car of the class conscious.

But conformity not only pressures us personally -- it's impact is political and religious as well. Recent elections again illustrated how winners succeed by conforming to the expectations of the status quo -- not by calling for renewed discipline and sacrifice from the constituency. Walter Mondale illustrated it; Michael Dukakis substantiated it; and

George Bush succeeded at it. Successful political contenders stomp the country telling us how good we'll have it if we vote for them. They do not appeal to our sense of sacrifice or discipline - they appeal to our sense of selfishness and conformity. "NO NEW TAXES - READ MY LIPS." The American electorate has become a pampered people by both political parties -- squeezably soft on big government; squeezably soft on human rights and racism; squeezably soft on abortion, gun control, drug & alcohol addiction; squeezably soft on oil consumption and other environmental issues; squeezably soft on child care and welfare. The list goes on -- we're very soft on anything that might have a personal cost to us. Only one exception - we seem to rally a hard-core feeling of sacrifice from all parties and all peoples on our willingness to go to war. Of course the most serious problem in that arena is that our model for war conforms to the outdated Hitler era -- when it was so much easier to identify the good guys from the bad guys. There is little doubt in anyone's mind that Saddam Hussein is truly one of the bad guys -- but I hear almost no one in America addressing the Muslim rage caused by westerners who have raped the masses in the middle east of their property dignity and equality as God's children. I am far more fearful of the Muslim rage than I am of their one crazy leader.

But let us not only chastise political conformity and its partisan abuses. The religious establishment is not a white knight in shining armour. For not only has TV religion been squeezed into the mold of popular packaging at the cost of true discipleship - but all of religious merchandizing is becoming squeezably soft (meaning - dictated more by the margin of profit than the meaning of prophecies). A couple of months ago the Christian Booksellers Assoc. convention was held in Denver. Over 11,000 bookstore sellers and buyers gathered to market the latest in Christian paraphernalia.

As one soon learned - this was more than Christian baby bibs and Christian videos ... more than Christian T-shirts and Christian pottery, jewelry, candles and greeting cards. The Bible Study Pen Co. (how's that for entrepreneurial) was selling a Christian pen for Bible Study, saying that it was the "Highest Quality Pen in America by a Christian Company ... and it offered an everlasting highlighter and pen all in one." Jesusworks Activewear offered dozens of styles of T-shirts and shorts. One of the most popular slogans was: "the righteous JUST DO IT by faith." One of the buyers commented: "Now I finally know how the Roman Cath. have reformed their birth control and family planning today -- it's by faith alone, and no human works. Maybe your interest is Christmas gifts. Harbor House Gifts has a bumper sticker saying "Beam Me Up Jesus." How's that for a Star Wars Theology? Instead of baseball cards, religious vendors are now selling bible cards. Kids can get all 12 disciples and all the heroes of the Old Testament. No one was able to say whether the "Jesus Card" came with a higher price of discipleship.

These illustrations need not be carried any further. We all know the meaning of being "conformed to this world ... of the world squeezing us into its own mold." Paul found himself in the same, exact dilemma. In his day the ritual slaughter of animals was viewed as an appropriate sacrifice to the diety. In the middle ages, conforming to obligatory mass attendance was viewed as the appropriate sacrifice to the diety. Today, conforming to a few years of catechism instruction and then occasionally worshipping afterwards is viewed by many as an appropriate sacrifice to the diety.

The problem for Paul, for the middle ages, and for the church today has not dramatically changed -- God's grace has not reflected a deeply, personal transformation of people's lives. As we discussed this very issue at the Mission 90 study on Wednesday night -- several people seemingly said -- why all the emphasis upon "grace" in the church today. Well, as you all know, "grace" is the undeserved love of God -- when we should be purged to hell for our sinful, selfish, greedy, materialistic living -- instead God mercifully says: YOU ARE FORGIVEN AND FREE. NOW GO AND SIN NO MORE. That's why the song is called "Amazing Grace" -- because it is so totally, so vehemently contradictory to the way we respond to one another when we fall short of our own standards of glory. In worldly circles, we only praise those who have proven to be the epitome of perfection. As our kids quickly learn - screw up once on the football field ... and the coach will make you feel like a total jerk. But not so with God -- God greets us after our infinite failures with forgiving grace. But as one of my seminary professors once said: "God wants us to know that we are eternally loved and forgiven in our sinfulness ... BUT GOD ALSO WANTS TO SEE FROM OUR LIVES THAT HIS GRACE HAS MADE A DIFFERENCE ... THAT IT HAS HAD A TRANSFORMING EFFECT UPON THE WAY WE LIVE IN THE FUTURE." God's power of perfection is not persecution, but rather the proclamation of grace -- of merciful help and forgiveness.

For eleven chapters in the book of Romans Paul expands upon this Amazing Grace - that God is not an angry coach, but a gracious guidance counselor who gives infinite love and mercy. So the question for Lutherans becomes: WHAT DIFFERENCE HAS GOD'S GRACE AND MERCY MADE?? And the answer given by St. Paul is: Instead of being perpetually squeezed into the selfish mold of culture, now let your mind be remolded (be transformed) by God's generous goodness and grace.

God's grace gives and gives and gives unselfishly to us in order that we might be TRANSFORMED to give like him. Paul says: Because you have been graced, let your minds be remade into God's gracious image of human living and giving. Because you have received the ultimate IDEAL of God - his mercy instead of his damnation -- let your lives be transformed to offer God's idyllic mercy to others. Because God's grace has not fractured or fragmented his body into the good guys vs the bad guys, then as one who is a part of his healed body let your life transform the ruptures and divisions and animosities that cause so much pain, persecution, prejudice, and pettiness in this world.

And where does this transformation begin. Always in the same place - through a confrontation with the cross of Christ. Personal transformation for you and me begins when we become transfixed by Christ's cross rather than our own glory. The cross of Christ needs to dominate every moment of a Christian's life. It's more than crossing ourselves during a worship service - it's remembering the cross every time we encounter the opportunity for sacrifice and discipline. In fact, one writer says we need to remove a cross from every sanctuary and erect it in our modern malls. George McCleod said: "I simply argue that the Cross be raised again at the center of the mall as well as the sanctuary. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a Cathedral between two candles, but on a Cross between two thieves; on a town garbage heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew, Latin, Greek (or shall we say today English, Bantu, and Spanish) ... at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died - in the market place. And that is what he died for -- a sinful world, not a sinful church.

Maybe that's why Christians are too conforming and not transforming -- they are only confronted with the cross for an hour a week. God help us to lift high the cross every moment of our lives. Then no longer will Air Jordans be the epitome of our lives; then we might even settle for old sandals over new sneakers. As we confront the cross - conformity to our secular jobs will still be an important goal, but transforming the work place with the mercy and love of Christ will become the ultimate goal. When Christ's cross is before us - having the squeezably soft interior of a Lincoln Town Car may truly be satisfying, but comforting the hungry and homeless will truly become our daily mission of transformation. Because as Christians transformed by the grace of God ... our greatest commitment is to be conformed to the will of God ... what is good, acceptable and perfect in his sight. And we learn those traits of transformation from "taking up the cross of Christ."

That continues to be the graphic reminder for all who visit the Mount of Olives in Israel. As you stand in the Garden of Gethsemanee and look out to the city of Jerusalem, you see the Kidron Valley on one side -- the valley of persecution and death. But as you turn and face the opposite direction, you find the Judean desert at the other foot of the Mt. of Olives. Tour guides point out how easy it would have been for Jesus to slip away into the desert on that fateful evening. He could have chosen to be squeezably soft - to have avoided the greatest act of transformation ever given to humanity -- the free gift of grace through death on the cross. But he stayed -- he lived and died to transform you and me.

And now, we bear his name, we reflect his spirit, we continue his mission, we take up and carry his cross. Christians are what true religion is all about -- MORE THAN SQUEEZABLY SOFT ... TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWAL OF THEIR MINDS THROUGH THE SACRIFICE OF THEIR LORD.

Or as Richard Leaky ASKS in his archeological book about African life called PEOPLE OF THE LAKE, what separates humanity from the great apes. It is not his intelligence, but rather his generosity. Only human beings have the ability to share. Only human beings are capable of genuine compassion. Only human beings are capable of laying down their lives for their friends. Only human beings have the faithfulness to "take up the cross and follow Christ." Only human beings, and human beings alone, are not mere creatures of God, but children of God. Only human beings can be MORE THAN SQUEEZABLY SOFT -- they can be transformed by the renewal of their minds and prove what is the will of God -- what is good, acceptable, and perfect in God's sight. AMEN.

PENTECOST XV
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
September 20, 1992
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"ALWAYS AT THE HEAD TABLE!"

"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Luke 14:11

We live in a world and society that is very conscious of "head table" etiquette. I doubt that I have ever done a wedding where I wasn't aware of either the groom's/ bride's mother worrying and fretting over seating arrangements for the family & guests. It's just amazing how nasty family and friends can get when they don't feel they have been seated close enough to the head table. Yes, head tables really get our attention. As Toledo Rotarians, we are deeply conscious of this "head table" attention. Every week the president recognizes a different "head table" -- that week's classification of Rotarians who are being honored for "service above self." Obviously, we all need recognition and reward for our best efforts to be truthful, fair and builders of goodwill. But as a Rotarian, I must admit ... sometimes all this "head table" halabaloo really feels to me just like another exercise in self-exaltation.

Please don't get me wrong! Neither I nor our faith has any argument with a social and professional pecking order. We all realize there must be chiefs in this world. In fact, in this era of decision by consensus or special interests, we are all hoping for a president in 1992 who will not be so influenced by the right or by the left. Whether it's the nation, the city, or the congregation - economic, political, church or relational progress is never made when everyone thinks he/she deserves the same place at the head table. As horrendous as they often become, pecking orders and positions are essential for effective management in this sinful, imperfect society. But no one in this room today is unaware of how divisive, how hurtful, and how disastrous life can become WHEN PECKING ORDERS OR POSITIONS OR EGOS OR QUOTAS BECOME THE CONTROLLING POWERS BY WHICH WE LIVE.

That was so graphically illustrated in a recent article about two researchers for the Kinsey Institute who began a rather extensive survey of sexual attitudes of 3,000 adults in 1970. By 1980 the work was compiled and almost ready for publication. One small (or shall I say, insurmountable) detail remained: Albert Klassen and Colin Williamsburg - the authors of the survey - still needed to agree on whose name would appear FIRST on the publication. Guess what? A decade later - that's right, 1990 - and the research was still waiting for publication. Other researchers interested in the results had to intervene to help resolve the issue. Evidently, the academic community felt that 10 years was long enough for two men to decide whose name should come 1st on the title page! We laugh at such an exaggerated case of "head line" attention. But is it really that exaggerated?? Having lived with a member of the academic community for some 23 years now, I've heard too many of the same stories!

And such stories are hardly unique to the academic community! These tales of self-exaltation are prevalent amidst every sector and sub-sector of life. I've heard some real classics about doctors and lawyers, but let me point the finger more toward home this morning - at the church & its clergy. Why is it that seminarians today do not want to serve as Assoc. Pastors in team ministries?? Could it be that pastors have the same ego problems as everyone else?!? As one who has sometimes needed his ego trimmed - that is most certainly the case! Of course, I must also say that at Hope Church I am always at the end of the potluck line ... and probably in the kitchen cooking more than most women of the church--so it's not always self-exaltation. But seriously - the facts speak for themselves: the church has far too many servants much more concerned about status and power and position and sitting-in-the-highest-seat than seeking to reflect Christ's focus of sacrificial servanthood!

And that was exactly the situation confronted by Jesus in the Jewish-Christian community reflected in Luke. The body of Christ had become just another social club of the culture. The energies and concerns of the leaders - esp. the Pharisees - were no longer on ministry, on serving, on mercy for the destitute, on compassion for the poor, the crippled, the lame, the lonely, the lost and blind. The whole essence of religious community life had become an obsession with "head table" etiquette. As Jesus came to the sabbath feast, there was no evidence of a sacramental spirit - everyone was jockeying and scrambling for the best seats ... for the more prominent places ... for the places that offered the greatest glory, recognition and status. So Jesus pulled no punches! In his characteristic manner so often seen in parables, he exaggerates his point - telling people to take a lower seat in order to be invited up to a higher place. Can't you just see Jesus almost choking as he offers this tongue & cheek example of playing musical chairs. He had but one point to make with all this "lower taking higher and higher taking lower:" SELF-EXALTATION IS OUT OF BOUNDS FOR ANYONE WHO CLAIMS CHRIST AS HOST OF THE HEAD TABLE!

And why would Jesus offer such an indictment on egocentricity and self-exaltation? Because Jesus Christ is the one who has extended the invitation to each and every one of us "to move up higher" ... "to come up to his table" and be honored at the head table with Him. There is no higher seat in life than to sit with Jesus Christ at the Table of the Lord. How can any Christian ever come to this Table of the Lord and receive the highest honor of life (the forgiving mercy of God) ... and then turn around and go out to other tables of life and make his/her self-worth more important than what was given by God!?! It is a total contradiction of our faith -- to share the feast of victorious love with Christ ... and then turn around and claim that our positions, our powers, our prestige is more exalted than his! That's the ultimate blasphemy at God: TO RECEIVE HIS VICTORIOUS AND EVERLASTING LOVE ... AND THEN TURN AROUND AND CLAIM TO BE GREATER THAN GOD HIMSELF!

Jesus says: "Come unto me all of you who labor, and I will give you rest." I will give you relief from the idiotic ego games that people play at the tables of life. Yes, Jesus says ... "come unto me ... come up with me ... and I will make you an equal with me ... I will empower you with the truth ... my grace will remove the facades and distortions of status and prestige that are flaunted as the true essence of life.

Dear friends in Christ - this is the only place in life where you and I are ALWAYS AT THE HEAD TABLE!! Amidst the body of Christ - there are no special seats for some and lessor places for others. (That's what God offers us in Holy Baptism - the promise that we will always be asked to come up higher to be seated at his place of honor -- where forgiveness and mercy and compassion and understanding reign supreme!) That's why we call the word proclaimed in this place THE GOSPEL -- THE GOOD NEWS -- the news that finally reveals our true self worth, our true sacred value: God has set us apart to be a royal priesthood ... to be a reflection of what true human worth looks like ... where love and mercy and kindness and concern for the lost and least STAND WAY ABOVE EGO AND SELF-EXALTATION. That's the gospel -- that God has given each of us great sacred value -- we are honored by God to sit at the highest seat ... to be at the head table with our Lord.

So what does that really mean? Does it mean that God wants us to flaunt our highest seats w/him? Quite to the contrary! It means we are to follow the example of the one with whom we are seated, Jesus Christ: WE ARE TO HUMBLE OURSELVES INSTEAD OF ALWAYS EXALTING OURSELVES! "Humbling" doesn't mean that we think of ourselves as nobodies or whimps! It means that we think of ourselves as Christ thinks of himself: NOT IN WHAT WE CAN GET FOR OURSELVES, BUT RATHER IN WHAT WE GIVE OF OURSELVES. That's the way Christ humbled himself: he became obedient unto death ... he gave up himself for the goodness of others. Rather than exalting his status as the Son of God, he surrendered that power and position and became our Friend instead of God's Sniper in the Sky! That's why we sing, What a Friend We Have in Jesus!

And let's face it - who are the ones we honor and remember for all eternity?? Certainly not the ones who are always jockeying and scrambling to be seen in the seats of honor at the head table. We all know how we truly detest those who are always seeking the glory for themselves!! Yes, you can always spot those who are parading their own prominence! And to those who play that game of exaltation, Jesus says: "they will be humbled!"

But for those who sit at the head table with the Lord - those are the ones who have learned from the host at the table THAT GREATNESS IS NOT IN WHAT YOU HAVE GAINED, BUT IN WHAT YOU HAVE GIVEN FOR OTHERS. Those are certainly not

the rich and famous. Those are the ones that have tasted the feast of victory. Those are the Albert Sweitzers, the Mother Teresas, the Martin Luther King Jrs ... the ones for whom a little bread and taste of wine mean so much more than a full belly ... the ones who have humbled themselves like their Lord ... the ones who have surrendered their own status and power and prominence in order to serve and sacrifice for the needs of the lost and least of the world.

So - every week, we again stand at the door of this banquet hall and knock timidly. And the large red doors swing open. And the red carpet is laid out before us, ALWAYS LEADING TO THE HEAD TABLE. And the same host smiles warmly and beckons us forward. He holds out his hands and says: "Come up here and sit with me!" "For those of you who exalt yourselves will be humbled, but those of you who humble yourselves with your Lord - WHO SEEK TO GIVE RATHER THAN MERELY GAIN - YOU WILL BE EXALTED!"

AMEN.

PENTECOST XV (RALLY SUNDAY)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
September 12, 1993
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"WHEN LOSERS BECOME WINNERS"

Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" But Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but human things. Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Matt. 16:24-26

A couple of years ago, Teen magazine published an article entitled: "SUCCEED AT ANYTHING BY JUST APPLYING TEN PRINCIPLES (we could call them the "Ten Commandments" of Teen magazine.) I don't have time to comment on all ten, but let's look at five to give you the flavor of things:

1st - BELIEVE IN YOURSELF. Obviously, we all know the importance of self-confidence; but this first principle is a far cry from the first commandment: BELIEVE ABOVE ALL IN GOD! Secondly, Teen magazine advises - ALWAYS ACT CONFIDENTLY, and then goes on to say that "even if you don't feel that way, just follow the old "fake-it-till-you-make-it" adage. So, now teens have been told to believe in themselves EVEN IF THEY MUST FAKE IT. Thirdly, SURROUND YOURSELF WITH GO-GETTERS. That sounds pretty good, but now what do you do with the 80% of your friends who aren't go-getters. Fourthly, NEVER TAKE FAILURE PERSONALLY! In other words, don't admit that you've made a mistake; and we wonder why young people today have so much trouble saying, "I'm sorry!" Finally, ALWAYS REWARD YOURSELF - in other words, think first and foremost about yourself and filling your own needs.

We might laugh at these & write them off as mere teen-age platitudes, but basically, these principles are the strategy for winners in this world. By and large, most of us agree with them. We will do anything to be winners - to avoid defeat, and we certainly don't want our children to experience defeat. We want to be WINNERS ... and we want our children TO BE WINNERS - so, we preach "believe in yourself, always act confidently .."

We show our faith in these principles almost every day, whether in our obsession with sports or our superstition with defeat or our denial of death & defeat. Friday's edition of the Blade revealed the story of two Mich. cities: Britton and Deerfield. The two high schools from these towns had been arch rivals for decades. But the size of their schools was meaning that they often had 150# lineman up against 250# lineman from competing schools. So the two schools merged their football teams. Then they gave all the rationalizations - it was cheaper; it meant more fans in the stands; it meant more equity with other schools in the conference; and they even claimed they didn't do it TO WIN! But being a sports nut myself who was raised on the Lombardi rationale for football, I am skeptical when anyone says: WE DON'T CARE ABOUT WINNING!

I have yet to find any true-blooded American sport's promoter who doesn't care about winning. I am certain there are some Michigan fans here today who aren't feeling real good about yesterday's results, esp. in light of OSU & Washington.

And that's exactly the same set of circumstances that confronted Peter in today's gospel text. Peter was still reeling from the glory that he had just experienced in being "told that upon the rock of his faith, Jesus would build the church." Like Teen magazine, Peter was believing in himself ... he was acting confidently ... he wanted to surround himself with go-getters ... he had no room for personal failure ... he was looking forward TO THE BIG REWARDS. And then Jesus says "that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and be killed." No way would Peter accept this as the mission of Jesus Christ or HIS Church. And if you or I had been there - we would have undoubtedly reacted just like Peter!! Much like this Jewish way - there is only One American Way ... and that is TO BE A WINNER; TO BE VICTORIOUS; TO NEVER SUFFER DEFEAT!

The term "sacrifice" is not a high-ranking term in our American vocabulary. It was used briefly by the current administration in Washington; but that has now been changed to "consensus strategizing." In fact, when it comes to the word "sacrifice," I only know of one sport that uses the term - baseball. It's called the "sacrifice fly;" and you only hit a sacrifice fly when someone's on third base with only one out and you can be assured of scoring a run.

Yes, not only Peter had difficulty with the reality of "sacrifice;" we all have difficulty when our team or our country or our church has to make sacrifices. And we even have more difficulty when we have to LOSE. This past week I was with one of our young people who had just been informed that she had lost: she did not make the team as she had wanted. Her heart was crushed; and mine was crushed for her. I wanted so much to take away the reality of loss. Much as I often want to do for patients who receive bad news in the hospital -- I want to magically transform them from LOSERS INTO WINNERS.

And that is our greatest temptation as individuals, as a society, and as a church -- TO THINK THAT WE DESERVE ALWAYS TO BE ONLY WINNERS. That is when we know that Satan has us by the seat of our pants -- when we approach life demanding to be nothing but WINNERS! Last week, Peter was the Great Confessor! This week Peter became the Great Contradictor! Because he had succumbed to the mentality that faithfulness ONLY LEADS TO WINNING! Peter had changed from rock to stumbling block ... and which one of us has not vasculated IN the same way in our faith to Jesus Christ and the church. That's why agnostics can have such A HEYDAY US AND THE CHURCH -- BECAUSE WE RARELY LIVE CONSISTENT TO OUR CONFESSIONS! We profess faithfulness, yet often we live like cowards! We claim to be committed, yet we are often unwilling to make the sacrifices that we claim in our confessions. (BIGGEST CHALLENGE OF BAPTISM!!) We do the things that we know we should not do, and we don't do the things that we know we should do!

True Christians know at least one thing for certain about themselves -- THEY ARE OFTEN LOSERS! THEY MAKE MISTAKES; THEY FALL SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD; THEY MAKE PROMISES THEY DON'T KEEP; THEY LOSE THEIR TEMPERS WHEN THEY ARE TRYING TO BE PATIENT AND KIND; AND THEY DON'T ALWAYS WIN, EVEN WHEN THEY GO TO MICHIGAN OR OHIO STATE. THEY NEED TO BE REDEEMED/FORGIVEN!

Yes for Christians - that's the first step toward winning - by admitting that the world does not revolve around me or my church or my school or my family or my image of myself. To admit that I am a loser is to already be on the road to winning. But there is even a more important confession: LOSERS BECOME WINNERS WHEN THEY BELIEVE NOT ONLY IN THEMSELVES, BUT WHEN THEY BELIEVE IN WHAT CHRIST STOOD FOR - NAMELY, WHEN THEY LIVE BY THE WAY OF THE CROSS. Only when we lose our lives for Christ sake do we truly experience winning the ultimate victory. (That's what it means for Lauren to be a light of Christ/another one who will lose her life for Christ!)

Let me illustrate with the most graphic reality that is ongoing at this very moment. For thirty years, Israel and Palestine have been seeking to DESTROY ONE ANOTHER & WIN THE VICTORY! And what has all of this effort at being winners got them? There has hardly been a week gone by that we have not read about death, destruction & terrorism along the West Bank, in the Holy City, between the PLO and Israeli troops.

But all of a sudden a new spirit has arisen between these hostile nations. I would call it the Spirit of the Cross of Christ. Because for the first time in 30 years, both nations have been willing to lose ... to surrender a little terf and arrogance for the sake of the good of all peoples. Both countries have finally surrendered to a higher power than themselves; both have recognized that each must be willing to DENY THEMSELVES & LOSE A LITTLE CONTROL in order for both to be winners. Both have "denied themselves and taken up the cross and followed Jesus" (even though they wouldn't use those terms) ... they have SURRENDERED THEIR OWN ARROGANCE AND CLAIMS AND DEMANDS IN ORDER TO SEEK THE GOOD OF ALL PARTIES AND FACTIONS.

Another story. Many of you remember last year when Dennis Bird, a New York Jet football player, was hit from behind on the field and immediately paralyzed. Dennis could only be described as a LOSER -- he lost his career, his team, his source of income, his future prestige, his ability to even move. But this loss inspired Dennis to see a whole new vision for his life: instead of seeking the glory for himself on the football field, he and his wife will be devoting themselves to developing a camp for improving the lives of handicapped kids. With that vision in mind, he fought to overcome his paralysis. And last Sunday when the NFL season began for the New York Jets, it was Dennis Bird who painfully walked to the center of the field -- tossing the coin and showing that LOSERS BECOME WINNERS when they take up the cross and follow Jesus.

But these stories are not the ULTIMATE STORY! The real story has been told for some 2000 years now. This story transcends the sports world and all other global factions. In

this story, God presented his own body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, without blemish or any boasting. This was the ultimate story of sacrifice that has motivated and inspired all other stories. Because once God made this sacrifice in the person of Jesus Christ, then there was no longer any need for animal or human sacrifices on bloody altars as was practiced by our ancestors. Now in response to God's sacrificial love in Christ, God simply calls upon us TO OFFER OURSELVES AS TOTALLY AS WE POSSIBLY CAN. Just as baseball players who hit those sacrifice flies have to arrive at spring training in shape and ready to go, so we always come before God saying: "Here I am, Lord, ready to go! (esp. on Rally Sunday) How can I lose myself today for the good of someone else who needs the victorious power of Your love? How can I listen and care for others who are hurting? How can I teach so that the children and youth of this church might better experience your love? How can I more fully offer a proportion of what you have first given me AND REDUCE THE DEFICIT? How can I make certain that God Almighty is seen as first above all other things, whether those things be work or play or careers or cars or houses or sports or whatever? How can I lose myself in order that I might win others thru the love of Christ?!?"

Recently, two West Point cadets learned the answer to these questions in a very real way. The first had great athletic ability and intelligence; his friend had average intelligence and poor athletic ability. But to graduate from West Point, both seniors had to pass a physical fitness test which included push-ups, sit-ups, and a two-mile run within a set period of time. Both cadets took the test on the same day. For the one cadet, the test was no sweat; for the other, it looked like the stumbling block of his whole West Point career. Both cadets passed the push-ups & sit-ups; BUT THE TWO MILE RUN WAS STILL FACING THEM.

The first cadet had completed this two-mile run many times within the set time; the second cadet had never succeeded in achieving the run. They were off, the first cadet way ahead of the other. The further the second cadet ran, the more sapped of energy and confidence he felt. Just about the time he was ready to give up, the first cadet looked back and saw his friend at the brink of defeat. He retreated, knowing that it would cost him valuable time as well as points in his overall standing in the class. But he let the second cadet catch him, and then began shouting to him to "Go for it ... to simply keep running with him and both would make it."

They both made it - and it was a great thrill of victory for both to cross the finish line - esp. the second cadet. But there was only one thing wrong -- both of them had failed the test! YET, HERE WERE TWO LOSERS WHO HAD TRULY BECOME WINNERS! Because one had taken up the cross of Christ and denied himself in order that both might "keep the faith & finish the race!" And only the Navy would have been a LOSER that day if it had not graduated both of those seniors! THANKS BE TO GOD THAT WE ARE ALL LOSERS WHO HAVE BECOME WINNERS THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.

Amen.

*Pentecost XV
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
August 31, 1997
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor*

“IT’S WHAT’S INSIDE THAT COUNTS!”

And Jesus [quoting Isaiah] said, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ You abandon the commandments of God and hold to human tradition. Mark 7:6-8

Did you know that in Waterloo, Nebraska, a city law makes it illegal for a barber to eat onions between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m? ** Did you know that in Danville, Pennsylvania, by city statute the fire hydrants must be checked one hour before every fire? **** Did you know that in South Carolina there is still a statute which requires that any citizen going to church on Sunday morning without a gun is breaking the law? ***** In Georgia, there was a proposed luxury tax of \$250 per year on every bachelor. ***** Louisiana law says its illegal to whistle on Sundays. **** A Kentucky ordinance says that “burglary can only be committed in the night hours.” **** A Cleveland, Ohio Municipal code makes it a misdemeanor to smoke a cigar, cigarette or pipe in a cemetery. ***** In Michigan, an old statute actually states that a husband owns his wife, including her clothing; and if she decides to leave home, he “is allowed by law to follow her on the street and remove every stitch of said clothing.”**

There’s a whole bookful of these rules and regulations in a text called “It’s The Law!” I hope you’re amused by them as I was when I first came across many of these crazy laws. But sadly, many of these still exist on the books. And even more tragic, they diminish the sanctity of important laws. Because like it or not, meaningful life cannot be lived without important laws and traditions.

The power of human tradition and law is a mighty force in every stable civilization. Laws & traditions are vital in our worship, in our celebrations, in our social fabric, in the way we conduct business, in the way we judge -- in everything that is acceptable behavior in our society. Many people & even some religious traditions have tried to rid themselves of the chains & shackles of the law. These groups & people have ended up frustrated & failed. Tradition & law gives meaning & order ... form & substance to daily life. The world and everyone in it needs to be controlled; and the law serves that vital purpose.

But simply fulfilling the law has never and will never transform or redeem a civilization. Every war ever fought was ignited by heart troubles not legal troubles. Every marriage that ever crumbled died first in someone’s heart. Every murder, every theft, every sarcastic word, every abuse to helpless children, every act of deceit, every betrayal or broken promise is born first in the heart. Our world does not suffer because of bad laws, but sick hearts. And as much as we need the law to control us -- it will never heal us or redeem us.

A missionary once told about an African village where people were suffering chronic illness. The medical missionaries faithfully treated the villagers with

medicines, surgeries and antibiotics -- but all the people became sick again as soon as the treatments ended. Finally the doctors discovered the root of the problem was a contaminated well. No amount of medicine could cure anyone as long as the well was unclean.

The sickness in the village was merely a symptom of a deeper problem -- an inner well of contamination. So it is with you and me. **IT'S WHAT'S INSIDE THAT COUNTS!** What comes out of us either heals or poisons! When we do things we regret, whether trivial or terrible, the misdeeds themselves are only the visible symptoms of a deeper problem -- our hearts are estranged from God. Or as one author has said - "we've come apart at the heart," because we're alienated from our greatest power of perspective; we're apart from God! {Sin}

So, the struggle for every balanced life & every faithful religion is: How do we get back together again!?!? That was exactly the struggle facing the Pharisees of Jesus' day. These were good "church folk!" These were the religious elite of the day. These were those who prided themselves on "regular Sabbath worship -- probably even daily temple worship!" But the way they resolved the struggle was by creating 613 ceremonial laws of ritual purity on top of God's commandments. Their intention was good; the result was bad! Because now they had a religion of "clean hands" but not "clean hearts!" All their religious motivations were now for show & external purity rather than for changing or transforming the misery & perversion of the world.

For instance, the ritual washing of hands no longer had anything to do with hygiene or sanitation. You washed your hands to fulfill a religious ritual - now considered more important than loving relationships. It might be compared today to "hating the people you are dining with because they neglected to offer a table grace." Table prayers are important religious rituals. But could we possible despise and condemn others around the table simply because they neglected an important religious ritual??

- not washing hands - but despising
I have a "religious ritual" that may even better hit home. I hate ... I despise crumbs on the kitchen counter. Ask Susan sometime how many times I have blown my stack because she and the girls often leave crumbs on the counter. That is one the laws of "my kitchen" -- you shall not leave a single crumb on the counter. Obviously, it has a hygiene purpose. But when I go into orbit over crumbs on the counter -- what does that do to my relationship to Susan & the girls. It says that a few lousy crumbs are more important in my life than my family!! So a ritualistic law can and often has become the cause for separating human hearts rather than healing them! And that was exactly the situation with Jesus and the Pharisees; and it's often the same situation in many of our churches today!

The great temptation of religious folks in every age has been to create new rules & regulations to get themselves & others closer to God! And most often - the new rules simply become cause for some to feel self-righteous and the others to feel "put out." For instance -- I recently said that singing is one of the greatest

ways that we show the presence of the spirit. So, I could make a rule that every "true Christian" must sing in a choir! But would that draw our hearts nearer to God's heart? I wish it were so easy; but we all know how notorious choirs are "for only being here when they have to sing!" You see -- they are often living by the external thing rather than from the heart! The church is filled with people "honoring God with their lips & voices but not their hearts." So it is that some churches have instituted "mandatory tithing" as a means for showing the dedicated faithfulness of such members! But are these members "giving from the heart" -- or simply finding cause to boast about their religious purity? Too often, tithing can become just another "hand washing act" of ritual purity.

Tragically, the church has been far too focused upon instituting ritual formulas for ceremonial purity. We've rattled off our confessions, we've counted our beads, we've lighted our candles, some of us have spoken in tongues, others of us have chanted in Gregorian - while some today only want us to use Christian rock. And they all say, "do it our way at this time in this place, and you will surely know God's grace." And Jesus answers, "No -- you will only know cheap grace -- a religion of externals & outside purity!"

For nothing could be made more clear in the Bible than the fact that our ritual acts do not bring us closer to God. Amos said, "I despise your feasts, your rituals & solemn assembles; I will not accept your ceremonial offerings of peace." God has already acted once and for all on our behalf to bring us closer to his heart. In the life of Jesus Christ - we have seen fully the heart of God. And like Jesus himself -- the first and only step to becoming one with the Father is to surrender to his grace, mercy and love. No one can be ONE with the Father's heart who is still relying upon his own "clean hands" as the source of his ritual purity. Our weary, wayward and broken hearts come home to God when we say, *"Father, not my will, but thine be done!"*

We must get beyond "clean hands" -- beyond what we can see and control on the outside of our religious lives. "It's What's Inside That Counts!" And what's inside each of us are deep wounds ... wounds of guilt; wounds of grief; wounds of pride & arrogance; wounds of petty disputes; wounds of slander and sometimes wickedness; some of us may be suffering with wounds of addiction & greed! Washing our hands will not cure these wounds. All the rituals, traditions and laws of the church will not heal these wounds. Only the gracious love and forgiveness of the heart of Christ will be able to heal these wounds.

So take some time today to surrender your wounds to Christ! In fact, let's take the rest of this sermon time to begin to open up and unload our hearts to God -- to surrender all our wounds to his care [what wounds do you need to give over to God ... guilts; griefs; hurtful feelings; pettiness; etc]... so that we can become ONE in heart, soul, mind and strength with your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

AMEN.

*Pentecost XV
First English Lutheran Church, Toledo
September 16, 2001
Peter R. Martyn, Part-time Interim*

“Does One Equal More Than 99?”

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until it is found? Luke 15:4

Several years ago I found an anonymous note with a \$10 gift attached to the back entrance of the church. I remember it because it was obviously from someone feeling very lost, alone and rejected. And it was one of those notes that I saved as a keepsake of ministry. The note read:

Dear Pastor Martyn: A few months ago you talked to me and helped me very much. Please put this gift to good use for God. Please ask him also if the loneliness for this author would end soon, and that a good job might soon come along. Also tell him, “Thank you very much for entering my life.” Thanks a bunch!

I’m sure this person felt this high degree of aloneness because he felt that he was surrounded by Pharisees and scribes who simply would not give him the time of day. He was unemployed, so he didn’t “fit in” with the righteous ones. It must have been horrible to feel so totally rejected and alienated by all the “good people” of the world.

But one thing seemed to be certain for this person: he had felt a brief moment of being valued as one of God’s children. Evidently that brief time with me had given this person some HOPE ... for a brief moment, he didn’t FEEL QUITE SO LOST ... for a brief moment, he had a reason for feeling a little joy. Maybe you have had a similar experience; it’s amazing what an impact such a moment can be in a world that doesn’t take the time “to really care.”

But this is the context of Jesus’ parable today; he asks, “IF one is lost, does not the shepherd leave the ninety-nine, and go after the one which is lost?” Thank God for one brief moment when I evidently left the ninety-nine and gave my full attention to ONE that was 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 – either as pastors or lay people. Whether we admit it or not, we tend to live more by the values of the world than the values of our Lord. And the world values are very clear when it comes to numbers: GO AFTER THE 99 ... AND DON’T WORRY ABOUT ONE LOUSY LOST SHEEP. This Madison Avenue Marketing Mentality has totally infected the church and its mission. The good news of Madison Avenue is that only big numbers count. And the good news of the markets is that only the bottom line counts. So we are not supposed to worry about one lousy account when we have 99 good ones going!

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Let's face it – this parable seems totally out of touch with our world which is dominated by big numbers, by massive technologies and by huge global markets. How can one person possibly have special worth in such a world? How can the isolated and alienated and rejected ever have **REAL HOPE** in a world of growing conglomerates and escalating technology? The facts are – the standards of the world do not give the individual much reason for hope. We're told that the world is a jungle: an arena of fierce competition ... a market place which thrives on intimidation & terrorism and wheeling & dealing to beat the other guy to the draw.

Like it or not, that's the marketplace of our daily lives. And it's hardly a place that we would describe as the kingdom of God – a place of love and acceptance and special worth. That's why Luther developed what is known as the theology of the two kingdoms. On the one hand we have the marketplace of the world creating alienation, separation and ulceration. On the other hand we have God's kingdom creating harmony, wholeness and healing. And God's vision through this parable is that he wants no one to be lost to his kingdom. That's why he makes such a fuss over the loss of one lousy sheep – because he can't stand to see anyone separated from his healing love.

Dr. Richard Hoeffler in his commentary on this parable says, "This parable does not present a picture of how love ordinarily acts, but how love acts in an emergency." In other words, the parable suggests that God and his people are always on "Emergency Alert" – like fireman or EMT squads, the multitudes are by-passed in order to seek out the one who is in trouble. And we do this because that is God's purpose – **TO AFFIRM THE SPECIAL WORTH OF EVERY INDIVIDUAL**, regardless of that person's past. From God's vantage point, one lost person does equal more than 99 who are o.k. and accounted for. God cannot stand to see a single person or group alienated or separated or terrorized from his realm of love.

Regrettably, as was horribly shown this past week, sometimes it takes a major tragedy for people to become reconnected to God's vision of human worth. In NYC & DC, we certainly have seen God's "Emergency Alert" go into effect. The terrorist attacks brought out thousands of rescuers who have been working like trojans to seek the lost & wounded. What a graphic illustration of this parable – the lost being rescued. But as great as the effort has been – the question remains: How can we personally become like-hearted disciples of God's rescue effort??

Without a doubt – **WE CAN PRAY & pray & pray!** Never before have so many families needed our personal prayers. Our nation, our government, all our leaders, our military strategists, the rescue workers, the grieving families, the medical workers – the list goes on and on of those who need the power & encouragement of our prayers. How desperately the church needs to do now what it does best: **KEEP UP THE VIGIL OF PRAYER.**

But this week's tragedy also reveals a second disciple effort that can be done right here in our own neighborhoods. We have to ask: Are there any ways our own neighborhoods are being terrorized? Obviously, they have not been attacked by terrorist planes. But are there forms of suffering & terror going on?? For instance – is there any poverty or unemployment or depravation in this neighborhood?? In short, are there any lost or wounded people right here in the Old South End?? Well, who will be God's rescue team for these lost & wounded? Is that part of God's mission for 1st English? Yesterday's Council retreat made it very obvious that this community focus will be a necessity if 1st English wants to continue to be vital & growing.

Lastly, the tragedies of this week give God's people a new resolve against two forms of evil in our world: terrorism & idolatry. It should be obvious that terrorism must be obliterated! The world cannot tolerate this horrible evil! But we all have more difficulty with the problem of idolatry. Please understand – I abhor the destruction of the twin towers. But what do those towers and all the financial markets in downtown Manhattan represent?? They represent our tendency to worship & glorify huge structures & huge profits. Tragically, we have seen that even huge towers & financial markets are vulnerable to attack and devastation. God certainly doesn't want this or cause this evil attack – but he is now crying out: "Please my children – glorify my mercy, my compassion & and my forgiving concern for the lost, the wounded and the devastated - wherever they may be."

Today, God uses a simple parable to bring us back home – to rescue us from our worldly contamination with big numbers & big things & big successes. Our treasure is not in big numbers or big buildings or big budgets -- BUT IN THE SHARING OF CHRIST'S MERCY for the lost and the least. This is God's treasure – care for the lost & wounded. And terrorism or neighborhood transitions will never change God's focus for this mission of his people.

So today God again comes to search us out – to find if we are still most faithful to his spirit of mercy for the lost? Does he find us as his rescue team ... or does he find us glorifying the idols of the world? Well, in NYC & DC, he finds his true spirit of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. I believe God is using these rescue teams to inspire all of us to see a vision of his truth. Even after horrendous tragedy, God doesn't give up on his world. He comes back to rescue us with his Word and his sacraments; He even uses tragic world events to awaken us to his power of mercy. He rescues any sheep that are lost or need his eternal care; he brings them "home" (both to earthly homes & his heavenly home) and leaves his calling card saying, "Rejoice with me for I have found the sheep that were lost." Thanks be to God that he never abandons a single lost sheep!!

Amen.