

Preaching on the First or Second Reading with the Day's Gospel in Mind *4 – Taking Up the Challenge*

By James Tiefel

Many Cultures, One Lord is Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary's annual effort to observe the Martin Luther King holiday. I preached at the service in 2015 just as the Black Lives Matter movement was exploding. There is no official Proper for that service so I could choose my text without considering the other readings. I chose Acts 10 and 11 because I felt the early church's prejudice over against Cornelius and the Gentiles and the Spirit's response addressed the issue on our campus. I quoted passages from the entire event; the sermon had no formal theme. I concluded with this:

The story of planet earth since the fall is filled with battles between races and cultures and lifestyles. Today our nation stops for a moment to ponder solutions to these conflicts. In the end, only God's solution works. The encounter with Cornelius was a critical moment in Peter's life, and it is critical for us as well. As you remember this story, note the struggle in God's men and note the power of God's grace. Note the struggle and confess your sins. Note the power and trust the absolution. Right there is the solution for prejudice, there is the key to outreach and evangelism, and there is the path for your life and your ministry.

Four years later, in 2019, I encountered the Peter/Cornelius event again. Acts 11:1-18 is the First Reading for the Fifth Sunday of Easter in Year C (May 15 this year). Both this reading and the Second Reading, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, are new to the lectionary. It's instantly obvious that the Second Reading was selected to match the theme of the Gospel, John 13:31-35.

As I thought about which text to preach on, I hesitated to let the Gospel go since Jesus' command to love one another is so critical

to the Christian life. The Acts 11 reading was intriguing because it addresses the issue of prejudice at a time when this is a contentious issue in our world. So I asked the question: Can I preach on the First Reading with the day's Gospel in mind? It seemed that Peter's defense to the Jerusalem congregation was a legitimate application of the principle Jesus set down on the night he was betrayed.

I began with Thursday and set the stage that existed at vs. 35. Then...

And then Jesus said this: **A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.**

With these words Jesus is giving us our mission and our task for life: Love one another. He invites us to see his love for us and believe his love for us—love so deep that he died for us—and then he invites us to imitate his love as we live for others. Loving one another is the greatest and the grandest and most glorious task that we believers have—and we love because he first loved us.

Easier said than done, right? Knowing Jesus' command is one thing; we all know it. Doing Jesus' command is another; we haven't done what Jesus calls us to do, not nearly as often as we should. We admit it, we confess it, we ask for forgiveness, we try to do better. Sometimes. Maybe most of the time. But if we think a little, we might be willing to admit that there have been times when we aren't so convinced we need to love one another. We've been wounded, slighted, ignored, insulted. Must we love those who did it? We're better, superior, higher up on the morality chart. Must we love those below us? We're

Christian, conservative, Bible-believing, Lutheran. Must we love those who aren't?

Those are exactly the questions a lot of first-century believers were asking in the First Reading for today from Acts chapter 11. Their struggle isn't so different from ours. They knew what Jesus said and so do we: **Love One Another!** What they wanted to know and we what we want to know is this: **Are There Exceptions?**

I explained the standard Jewish mind set and concluded:

God commanded his people that they must have nothing to do with Gentiles. Don't marry them, don't visit them, don't eat with them. Bottom line: Stay clear of Gentiles.

Of course, the Jews understood that Gentiles could be saved. The Old Testament was filled with promises that the nations would come to see the light of the gospel. Plenty of Gentiles living in Israel heard Jesus preach and believed his message. The Jewish Christians were happy to accept the Gentile Christians. But here's where the problem came in. The Jews who followed Jesus were convinced that the Gentiles who followed Jesus had to obey the Old Testament laws. That's the way it had always been, but it wasn't going to be that way anymore. God had to set the Jewish Christians straight.

In two lengthy paragraphs I shared the main points of Peter's explanation in Jerusalem. Then came the application.

This was a big hurdle for the Jewish Christians. They got it right this time, but the struggle didn't end here. We have our own hurdles with this issue. We all know whom we love. But there are some people we have trouble loving. I love my family, but I have trouble loving my nephew who's into drugs and punk rock. I love my neighbors, but I have trouble loving the ones who have trash all over their front yards and junk cars in the back

yard. How about you? Who are the people you find hard to love, the people you might consider exceptions to Jesus' command? The co-worker who insulted you or took advantage of you? The relative who abused his wife and made her life miserable? The parent who was always gone and never had time for you or the child who never checks in? The homeless man who won't work, the black woman who has children with a variety of fathers, the addict who spends his welfare check on booze and pills, the Hispanics who try to enter America illegally? How about the acquaintance who brags that he's an atheist, your neighbor's gay son or lesbian daughter, the Catholic or the Baptist or the Mormon you were taught to dislike already when you were young? How about people in Vietnam who long to know Christian truth, the same people who tried to kill you 50 years ago? Yes, yes, yes, love one another, we say, but there have to be exceptions! Jesus says, Love one another—no exceptions.

How can we solve this problem that we all share? We solve it by looking to Jesus. **As I have loved you**, Jesus said. **As I have loved you**. The disciples had seen Jesus' love for three years, love for them and love for others. They were about to see the pinnacle of his love, the love that proclaimed his glory and that brought glory to his Father. I quoted Philippians 2:5-8 **...he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!** Because he did, we have no conscience plagued by sin, no guilt over past mistakes, no weakness facing temptation, no worry about the future, no fear in sickness, no uncertainty at death. He did this all because he loves us.

Don't look for flowers and candy. We're not talking about that kind of love. We're talking about the kind of love Peter had for Cornelius and his household, the kind of love Peter explained to the congregation in Jerusalem, the kind of love that led them to put away their objections, to praise God and say: **So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.** So now? Forgive and forget what's in the past. Understand and sympathize with those who struggle in poverty or sin. Feel compassion and concern for those who have fallen into temptation and error. Open your eyes, open your hearts, and open your wallets to help people longing for the gospel. You can't show your love to all, but you can show your love to all you can, and you can love them all in Christ—no exceptions!



The sermon I preached on Epiphany 6 was based on 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10, Paul's struggle with and solution to his thorn in the flesh. In the former *Christian Worship* lectionary this text concludes a *lectio continua* from 2 Corinthians (Pentecost 7B, paired with Mark 6:1-6, Jesus' rejection in Nazareth). So this is a new selection for Epiphany 6C to accompany Luke 6:17-26, Jesus'

words about blessings and woes. I was intrigued by the new selection and wondered about the connection to the day's Gospel.

I didn't work alone this time. Before the new CW lectionary was introduced in Advent 2021, I had access to Jonathan Bauer's *Commentary on the Propers Year C*. This volume has provided all kinds of interesting insights. (Some of this work is adduced in the Year C Worship Plan from Congregational Services, but the commentary has a wider scope and is wisely purchased.) The commentary doesn't directly promote the preaching approach I've taken in this series of articles, but its efforts to theme the day's Proper and to demonstrate the connection between the three readings are helpful. For example, comments on 2 Corinthians 12 include this: "Thus Paul had learned the paradoxical principle on which life in Christ's kingdom operates: strength is found in weakness. Paul knew that as he boasted in that weakness, he was seeking shelter in the tent of Christ's power" (*Commentary*, p. 96).

I had to work at finding connections between the Gospel and the Second Reading. Paul's thorn seemed to match the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the hated noted in the Gospel: difficult and challenging aspects of life (does Matthew 5 explain Luke 6 more completely?). The strength and power of Christ which rest on Paul and *τελείται* in weakness seemed to match life in the kingdom of God, the satisfaction and joy that come with salvation, and the reward in heaven. Paul's ability to boast and delight in his weaknesses seemed to reflect the blessedness that believers experience in their upside-down relationship with Christ. I themed the sermon: "Here's to the Good Life." I explored two truths: 1) the good life needs to be redefined and 2) the good life needs to be sought.

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My introduction offered a few examples of the good life. I went on:

In one way or another we all want a slice of the good life. Good health, money in the bank, a close family—whatever. The slice I want might be different from the slice you want, but whatever makes us happy is the good life we want. Nothing wrong with that, nothing at all. Nothing wrong from God's perspective, either. Truth is, God provides the good life in many ways. God loves to bless us, and he loves to make us happy.

The trouble comes when the good life doesn't show up. And the trouble gets worse when the good life is the only life that makes us happy. That's the problem Jesus was talking about in the Gospel today. Jesus was becoming a sensation in Israel. What he said was powerful and convincing. What he did was amazing; he healed diseases and exorcized demons again and again. People from all



Peter's Vision as found in Acts:11:1-18

over the Holy Land were following him. They all wanted a slice of the good life, just as we do.

Jesus saw the hopeful faces of his followers. He looked into the eager eyes of his new apostles. He knew they wouldn't find the good life they were hoping for, not if they stayed with him. The cross was coming for him and eventually for them. There would be no beaches, no cruises, and no job of their dreams. There would be suffering and persecution and death. The good life gone, vanished? No, not at all. Just different. And that's what Jesus taught in today's Gospel.

St. Paul wasn't there when Jesus spoke to his followers that day, and he certainly wasn't one of Jesus' followers, not then. Decades passed before Paul wrote the words of the Second Reading for today. But what he wrote gives us a concrete example of what Jesus was saying in the Gospel. Despite all his troubles, Paul was enjoying the good life to the max. And so can we. So we'll listen to Paul this morning, and we'll all say be able to say: Here's to the Good Life!

In exposition I summarized Paul's experience with suffering and examined his thorn in the flesh. I concluded:

Paul certainly realized the good life was probably beyond him, but he was praying at least for a better life, a life that would let him work and sleep and live without this pain or this distraction.

Jesus said no. Paul wrote, **But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."** So the thorn wasn't going away; no good life, not even a better life. But Jesus didn't really take the good life away; he just redefined it, he gave it a different



meaning. The key to the good life, the key to completeness and contentment and happiness wasn't to pull out Paul's thorn but to fill Paul with Christ. The grace that covered Paul's sins and the power that moved Paul's ministry was better than being thornless. The Savior's grace and the Savior's power—that was the good life. And that's the good life that Jesus gave to Paul. And so Paul wrote: **Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me...**

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Application came naturally:

Does life disappoint and frustrate and sour us then? Is the joy of living gone? Life doesn't have to be like that. No way! We still have the good life, but we have to redefine it, we have to explain it as Jesus did in the Gospel. The good life is to live in the *kingdom of God* where Jesus' grace forgives our sins and where his power guides our lives. The good life is to be filled and over-filled with Jesus' love. When Jesus serves us, we're always *satisfied*. The good life is to anticipate the *laughter* of heaven where we'll grin from ear to ear and giggle in

grace forever. With Jesus, we sit back and smile and we say, "Here's to the good life." Happy, content, at peace with God. In the Gospel today, Jesus says that people who have this good life are blessed. He said, **Blessed are you.**

The second point of the sermon was to encourage the faith-filled euphoria Paul felt (I will boast... I delight) when he realized the purpose of his weaknesses. After explaining Paul, I summarized Jesus:

poor—not poverty stricken or destitute but... being *hungry*—not fasting or starving but... *weeping*—not with forced tears or fake tears but... *insults*: People who live in their own good life can't stand people who live in the good life of Christ.

The conclusion followed:

This good life in Christ—this is the good life we want. If the Lord sees fit to remove our thorns or if he spares us the insults or the difficulties, great. We'll be happy. But the happiness we really want, that inner joy, that deeper contentment, that lasting peace is a happiness that comes only with the good life in Christ. Only there do we find grace and power. So we seek the good life and we pursue it, and we find it by boasting and delighting in our weaknesses. We confess our sins, we long for forgiveness, we sorrow over our failings, we endure the insults. Like Paul, we live with our thorns—the pain, the humility, the regret, the enemies. But also like Paul, we believe that we are strong when we are weak and Christ's power rests on us. So here's to the good life, the good life in Christ.

The concept of preaching on the First and Second Readings with the day's Gospel in mind isn't for every text or every preacher. Gospel texts, of course, and other texts, too, beg for an independent approach. Some preachers love the challenge of finding every sparkling gem in a single text. The new *Christian Worship* lectionary, however, unlike any lectionary before it, presents an interesting and intriguing challenge: to preach on texts which have been specifically and thoughtfully chosen to match the focus of the day's Gospel in a way that proclaims the unique truth of the text in light of the words and works of Jesus. I've enjoyed the challenge; perhaps you will as well.

