

SERMON

STARTERS

John O. Gooch

September 28, 2003 **16th Sunday after Pentecost**

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:2-22,
Psalm 124, James 5:13-20

Like Jesus before him, James had a deep compassion for persons alienated from society. In a time before antibiotics, the sick were often excluded by society, much as persons living with AIDS are today. One form of alienation that James addresses is sickness. The other is division within the church itself. Prayer is a response to both forms of alienation.

The healing of alienation has to take into account physical, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. Too often, we tend to move on and forget the sick, the poor, persons who are different, persons with whom we disagree. James reminds us that Christians are to reach out and include those people in our community. The healing that we offer to the marginalized is also a healing of the church – and it leads to forgiveness, both of our sins and of the sins of others.

James says the sick (and others who are alienated) have the right to ask for help. That is a radical message to our society today, where we tend to blame people for their own problems. James also reminds us that mutual accountability is an important part of healing for the church. And, above all, he insists on the power of prayer to heal illness, division, alienation—and indifference and self-centeredness.

October 5, 2003 **17th Sunday after Pentecost**

Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Psalm 25 or 26;
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

Terrorism. War. The stock market collapse. Pensions gone. Economic crisis. September 11th. We could use some good news. Job probably felt the same way, sitting out there on his ash heap. Like many of us, he wondered what God was doing.

If only he could have seen what was going on behind the scenes in this old story! God was setting him up! Tell the story to your congregation. Invite them to participate in the tension.

One of the key elements in this story is the character of God. What kind of God agrees to the tests to which Satan is putting Job? What kind of God is God? Is God ultimately responsible for all the evil in the world? What does your faith say?

Another key element is Job's integrity. In a way, his wife is right—what is there to live for? All this time, he's been faithful to God, and look at how he suffers. But Job knows there is a greater mystery to life – and to God—than he can see. He blows off his wife's question as so much "trash talk." He will hold on to God, even when it appears God no longer holds on to him. Job's faith is a lonely one that flies in the face of all the evidence of his life. But, in the end, his integrity is vindicated.

October 12, 2003 **18th Sunday after Pentecost**

Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15;
Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

Jesus' question hits the young man right where we live—in the heart of our identity. He asks a more relevant question than we might imagine. Try asking some adult who he is without telling you what he does. For many, "doing" equals identity. I used to see a bumper sticker that said, "The one who dies with the most toys wins." For many, identity equals what we have. Jesus' question strikes at the heart of our culture, with its emphasis on wealth and power. It's no wonder we sympathize with the young man. Isn't it enough to be good? Do we have to get into all this other stuff about identity and what's central in our lives?

The story reminds us that stewardship is about more than making a pledge. It's about commitment and life style and eco-

nomie choices. St. Antony of Egypt and St. Francis of Assisi are two Christians who took Jesus' question seriously and changed their entire lifestyles. They had nothing—and they had everything.

At the end of the story, Peter argues the opposite case—we've given up everything. But he wants to know what reward he'll receive for his sacrifice. What do we want for our stewardship?

October 19, 2003 **19th Sunday after Pentecost**

Job 38:1-7; Psalm 104:1-9, 24;
Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

It was the district youth rally. Youth were putting on a drama about the cross. "Jesus died for your sins," the youth in the play cried. "Yes," replied another youth walking past, "but what has he done for me lately?" Many people in today's society wonder what it is that Jesus does for us.

Strangely enough, Hebrews' conception of Jesus as high priest speaks to that question. Jesus, our high priest, knows exactly what it is to suffer, to deal gently with sinners, to be weak. As a human being, Jesus prayed for the disciples, for the crowds, for the sick and dying. As a human being, he learned to be obedient to the limitations of humanity—and to the Father. He knows what we need to be saved.

Through his suffering, Jesus became the source of our salvation. Because he was also God, Jesus has the power to save us. Both the human (knowing what we need) and the divine (having the power to grant what we need) are essential for salvation.

Post-modern Americans still need to hear the word of salvation—and to know that their salvation is safe in the hands of the one who both suffered and was victorious, Jesus Christ. What has he done for us lately? He continues to offer us salvation.

October 26, 2003
20th Sunday after Pentecost

Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34:1-8;
Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52

The church calendar refers to this period as “ordinary time,” that is the time when there is no “special” festivals of the church. One of the wonders of God’s love is that extraordinary things happen in “ordinary time.”

Bartimaeus cries out for mercy. He knows he needs help and is willing even to make a scene in order to ask for it. When we know what we need, when we are willing to ask God for mercy, then the divine mercy is always open to us.

It was obvious what Bartimaeus needed—he was blind, after all! But Jesus took nothing for granted. He asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus didn’t jump in and solve the problem—first, he found out exactly what Bartimaeus wanted. Why was he willing to make such a scene to ask for mercy? God does not come to us out of a fixed program, knowing what we need (although God does know what we need.) Rather God responds to our own sense of need—what do you want me to do for you? Imagine if you stopped the sermon for five minutes of silence, and asked each person in the congregation to focus on what they wanted God to do for them, to put their need into one simple sentence. What a powerful time of prayer you could have after that!

November 2, 2003
All Saints Sunday

Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24;
Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

I was at annual conference, the end of my first year in seminary. I had just written a paper on the theological meaning of the “communion of saints,” and felt pretty good about my work. Then I watched the long procession of people returning from the Eucharistic altar. They were the whole range of people one finds in the church. But what struck me was that this was the real community of the saints, people who were faithful to God in the ordinariness of their daily lives.

Then into the midst of that ordinariness comes the extraordinary coming of God’s kingdom. Today’s text in Revelation is about newness and fulfillment. God’s

promises come true, and heaven comes down to earth. The key to the kingdom is that God is with us. Look at how many times the word “with” is used in these verses. God is with us, and we begin to share God’s character. The holy city is the church, and we all share in what it means to be the “bride of Christ.” The kingdom is the ultimate wedding reception, where we celebrate living in love and joy and intimacy with God forever.

This is not an exclusive invitation. All the earth is invited, and the saints are those who respond to God’s invitation.

November 9, 2003
22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Psalm 127;
Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Remember the bumper stickers, “In case of rapture, this car will be driverless”? For a time, they were vivid reminders of a doctrine many of us don’t like to think about. Is Christ’s Second Coming only a time of judgment, death, terror, and only those fortunate enough to be raptured will be saved? The “Left Behind” novels so popular today reinforce some of those same images.

But, as I get older, I discover that the Second Coming is a hopeful doctrine for Christians. That is because the Second Coming reminds us that God is ultimately in control of the universe, and that, in the end, Christ will reign. Hebrews reminds us that the Second Coming is about salvation, not damnation; hope, not fear; love, not wrath. One of the favorite images of the writer of Hebrews is that of Jesus as high priest offering sacrifices. But, he says, Jesus’ sacrifice does not have to be repeated, as the Temple sacrifices were. Jesus’ sacrifice was made once for all, on the cross. In the cross (and resurrection) Christ overcame sin, death, and the power of the Devil. So, when Christ comes again, he will not have to deal with sin. Sin has already been overcome for all time. Rather, the Second Coming will be a time of joy, when full salvation comes to all God’s people.

November 16, 2003
23rd Sunday after Pentecost

1 Samuel 1:4-20; 1 Samuel 2:1-10;
Hebrews 10:11-14; Mark 13:1-8

The headlines are all about power. Military power in the U.S. and Britain; nuclear power in North Korea; weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Economic power, mostly expressed in the disastrous slide in the markets, and a surge in oil prices. Personal power, expressed in the dreams for self-fulfillment. The “self-help” section in any large bookstore is one of the largest sections, and most of the books are about how we can get personal power and security.

Hannah’s song is about just the opposite. For her, the future opens up only when God reverses the “way things are done.” It is the gift of God that the weak are made strong, the lowly are exalted, the hungry are fed, the poor made rich, and the barren given children. The song is about salvation, as have been so many of our texts this season. God’s salvation comes to those whom the world overlooks, because they have no power. And the world is turned upside down as the lowly enter the kingdom instead of the powerful.

What does Hannah’s song say to us about our national quests for power? About our drive for economic power? For personal power? Or even for church growth and popularity? What about our lives would God call us to change, in the light of Hannah’s song?

November 23, 2003
Christ the King

2 Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-12;
Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

It’s appropriate that, on the Festival of Christ the King, the Scripture begins with the question: “are you the King of the Jews?” This is a dramatic scene, a story worth re-telling to the congregation. Jesus is a king, but not of this world. He and Pilate understand kingship differently. We tend to think more like Pilate than we might wish. We act as if power were the ultimate right in the world, that wealth and office carry authority instead of responsibility. Jesus thinks on an entirely different plane.

The text begins with a question from

Pilate; it ends with another from him—“What is truth?” For John’s gospel, truth is the reality of Jesus. To “belong to the truth” is to recognize that in Jesus God has come into the world. It is to see the fullness of God revealed in Jesus, it is to hear God speak in Jesus’ voice, it is to recognize God’s truth in who Jesus is and what Jesus does. What is truth? Truth is to recognize that Jesus is a king, that he is the ultimate ruler of heaven and earth, and that he calls us to faithful discipleship in that truth.

Jesus is on trial here, but so is the world. Who will listen to him?



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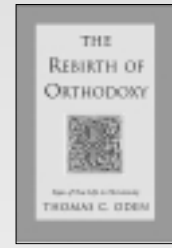
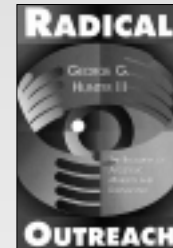
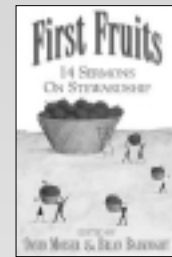
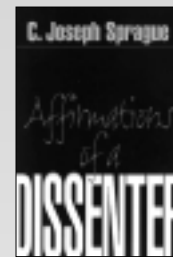
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