

# SERMON

# STARTERS

Christine P. Lee

**September 11, 2005**

**17th Sunday  
after Pentecost**  
Matthew 18:21-35

This is the fourth anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001. As we continue to heal from that incomprehensible tragedy, the Gospel lesson speaks directly to our response. Jesus' answer to Peter's question about forgiveness does not allow for exemptions. We cannot plead that the enormity of the attack we suffered is bigger than God's forgiving grace.

The only option is to enter into the story itself and discover why it is that Jesus calls us to forgiveness, even and especially when forgiveness is the last thing on our hearts and minds. First, we notice that in each case the creditor is within his rights to refuse to forgive and insist on what is due. Still, the individual who chose not to forgive is the only one who ends up trapped by his own debt, beyond any reasonable hope of relief. His unforgiveness gains him nothing and costs him his life.

Forgiveness then is not about what is due, but about what is possible. It is not a harsh requirement that restricts us. In fact the opposite is true. Forgiveness is an invitation to a gracious and abundant life, and it is actually quite practical. When we choose to forgive, we open up avenues for God's grace to enter into and transform our own lives, as well as the lives of people all around us.

Illustrations from personal and community experience can develop the body of the sermon, affirming God's grace and inviting everyone into the freedom of faith.

**September 18, 2005**

**18th Sunday  
After Pentecost**  
Matthew 20:1-6

The challenge of Christmas was to ensure that each child received equivalent gifts. With young chil-

dren the calculation was simple, just count packages. It got more complicated as they grew up. In truth, the best thing for one has nothing to do with the best thing for the other. But we know how vulnerable children are to the temptation to believe they can measure love by comparing gifts. The vineyard workers fall into the same difficulty when they measure fairness by comparing wages.

People still gather many places today in the slim hope of a day's work to provide another day of survival. Even though the work is often dangerous and debilitating, it is preferable to helplessness without hope. The Kingdom of Heaven offers work, wages, and hope to all who are waiting. This is a direct challenge to the way of the world, which has taught us to believe that whatever is added to someone else is subtracted from ourselves. The workers hired early in the day are still caught in that equation.

To read this story and imagine that the workers who only participate late in the day are somehow lazy and carefree is to miss the point. Those who are outside are cold and hungry and hopeless until they are invited in. The reward is the same for all, eternal life. The work that we receive to do for the Kingdom is not the price of admission, but the gift of hope.

**September 25, 2005**

**19th Sunday  
After Pentecost**  
Philippians 2:1-13

A background in computer programming sometimes helps to decode Paul's thought processes. In simplest terms, a computer program is built on a framework of "If — Then — Else" tests and decisions. With that in mind, it's clear the first verse of this reading is more than just a device to introduce the hymn of praise to Christ Jesus. It is the foundation of everything that follows. Encouragement, consolation, sharing,

compassion, and sympathy are the evidence we must test. If the answer is yes, if the condition is met, then can we aspire to live out of selflessness and humility. If the answer is yes, then we can know we are experiencing God at work in us. If the answer is no, there's no need to read any further because the rest of the argument simply doesn't apply.

Careful reading also reveals that Paul has not simply picked a random list of admirable qualities to string together as he leads up to a description of Christ's sovereign sacrifice. Each item on the list is something that we can only know in relationship with another person. The mind of Jesus Christ that is praised in the hymn was never a solitary experience. Jesus was always in intimate communion with the Father and accompanied by the Spirit. It follows quite simply that the experience of Christ in our own lives is not purely personal and one dimensional. It is only fully revealed in a vital community.

**October 2, 2005**

**20th Sunday  
After Pentecost**

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

The Ten Commandments have received a lot of press lately. Various courts and community groups are wrestling with the question of whether or not it is appropriate to post the commandments in public spaces. Regardless of any opinion about public policy, it is certainly appropriate to talk about these words in our churches and in our pulpits, in spite of the fact that we seldom actually find the list posted on our church walls. We should also be aware there are two dangers associated with writing these words on our walls. The first is the temptation to absolve ourselves of having to live them internally, since we can point to them outside of ourselves. The second is the unfortunate fact that we don't always live what we profess.

As a clergyperson, ironically enough, observing the Sabbath day and keeping it holy is always a challenge. A pastor works on Sunday, that's the nature of the job. Still, there is no clergy exemption for number five. In all honesty few of us, lay or clergy, can claim to observe each and every commandment to the full letter of the law. Idolatry is a subtle and ever-present temptation. Adultery and covetousness are rampant. Honoring our parents requires an ongoing participation in their lives and in their care as they age. While God doesn't express an opinion one way or the other about courtrooms, God does explicitly and specifically express the desire to see the commandments written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33).

**October 9, 2005**

**21st Sunday  
After Pentecost**

Exodus 32:1-14

**W**hat makes a giggling game of peek a boo so delightful? One player has to genuinely believe, "If I can't see you, you can't see me." The other player just has to be willing to cooperate. Eventually we grow up and graduate to hide-and-seek. We start to be able to grasp the idea that things don't disappear when we're not looking. But somewhere deep down the old belief lingers, along with the suspicion, "If I can't touch it, it's not real." So there is nothing really puzzling about Israel's desire to have a God they could see and touch. Throughout the trauma of the Exodus, the world had been behaving in unexpected ways; death stole away everyone unprotected by blood, rivers became roadways, something as ephemeral as dew became the substance of life, water flowed in the desert. And the only person who seemed to have some kind of grip on things had disappeared. It does seem that Aaron might have been a bit more responsible, but he was misled by a very pastoral desire to provide comfort and avoid conflict.

It's unsettling then to hear God give voice to dire threats while Moses remains the calm voice of the promise. But regardless of who speaks the words, the threat and the promise remain very real today. When we reach out to grasp by our own efforts what God has promised to provide, we court disaster. Yet God remains committed to the divine promise to save us from ourselves.

**October 16, 2005**

**22nd Sunday  
After Pentecost**

Matthew 22:15-22

**H**ow often do we ask a question with a genuine interest in hearing an honest answer? "How are you?" is a classic case, a question that's not really a question at all, simply a conventional greeting. We don't really expect anything more than "I'm very well, thank you." Sometimes questions are only asked to generate a specific response. My children always catch me when I ask a question that's really an order in disguise. They point out, for example, that "How would you like to take out the garbage?" really means, "Take out the garbage now!" The Pharisees in the Gospel lesson are even more intentional. They rigged a question to which there wasn't supposed to be any acceptable answer. It wasn't a question; it was a trap.

They intended to trap Jesus into blasphemy or treason. Either would have been sufficient for their purposes. Jesus, however, has the disconcerting habit of actually answering questions. He listens, understands the motives and the real needs of his questioners, and then answers them with the truth. More often than not his answers are totally unexpected. Sometimes they seem curiously unconnected to the original question, but always, on reflection, they are exactly on target. We are always welcome to bring our questions to the Scriptures. If we think we already know the answers, we won't hear anything new. When we expect the unexpected, when we are open and honest, our questions will be answered with the surprising and life-giving Word of God.

**October 23, 2005**

**23rd Sunday  
After Pentecost**

Matthew 22:34-46

**I** love chocolate. I love the beach. I love Johnny Depp. (You may substitute your own secret crush). We use the word love with reckless abandon. It can describe a craving or a preference or a general sense of well-being. Generally we use it to refer to our feelings, from the most superficial to the most passionate.

Think back to elementary school days though and remember those early English lessons, learning how to recognize the parts of speech. Then look at the simple sentences above. We are reminded that the word love is a verb, an action word. It's a special kind of verb that requires an object. We don't just love—we love something or someone.

When Jesus uses the word love, he is calling us to action. He doesn't mean that we should think kind thoughts or wish someone well. It doesn't particularly matter how we feel in fact. What matters is what we do, what actions we take. When our actions are faithful and consistent, our feelings will follow in good time. When Jesus uses the word love, he is very specific about the object: God first of all and neighbor. The scriptural definition of love is found in I John 4:7-21, where we read, in verse 8, that "God is love." We know what love is because Jesus reached out to us, lived for us, and died for us. Love is a word we might well choose to use less frequently, and more intentionally.

**October 30, 2005**

**24th Sunday  
After Pentecost**

Joshua 3:7-17

**M**y sister belongs to the Episcopal Church. When it came time to join, she had to wait until the bishop visited. During the service, he laid his hands on her head, offered a prayer, and welcomed her to the Communion. I warned her that she might be getting in more deeply than she had anticipated. When Methodist bishops lay hands on people they end up ordained. So far she's still safely Episcopalian and happily employed outside of the church. The specifics may vary widely, but the tradition of laying on of hands has endured from the very earliest experience of the people of faith, long before bishops or churches or even the nation of Israel.

Why is this gesture so significant? What is the power of touch, how does it confirm the words that are spoken? Touch is vital to both our physical and emotional health. Without it, babies fail to thrive and adults can slip into depression. Sadly, in this context we need to remember that for some people touch can be abusive and threatening when it is corrupted by sin. Still, we are driven by the urge to touch.

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It's the way we learn about the world around us. Children's museums are places where touching is allowed. Something as abstract as a blessing becomes real and powerful for us when it becomes tangible. God has always offered us things to touch—water, bread, wine, each other—to help know that God is real.

**November 6, 2005**

**All Saints Sunday**

1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

**A** long, long time ago, people used to play board games. I remember one game that included a little slip of red plastic. You had to have the plastic to use as a lens to reveal the secret message hidden on the playing cards. Without the red plastic, the clue blended into the background and couldn't be deciphered. Everything worked well until we lost the slip of plastic. The presence of God in the world can blend into the background unless we know there's something to look for and unless we have the proper lens that allows us to see. John's letter promises that we can see and know God; the beatitudes in Matthew describe exactly what the proper lens looks like.

All Saints Sunday is at one and the same time the reminder of our human grief and our faith in God's promise. In the beatitudes we discover it is exactly in the difficult realities of life that God wants to be revealed—in poverty of spirit and in mourning, in unquenched hunger and thirst for righteousness, in suffering. We don't have to seek those things out, they have found us, or they will. Whether or not we also see God standing there with us depends on whether we choose mercy and humility and purity and peace as the lens we use to look around us. All the saints are those who have seen and been recreated in the image of divine love. □



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