

SERMON

STARTERS

Robert v. Dodd

August 13, 2006

**Tenth Sunday after
Pentecost**

2 Samuel 18:6-9, 15, 31-33; Ps. 130;
Eph. 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

Food That Satisfies

When David was King of Israel, his son Absalom led a military attempt to overthrow his government and establish himself as king. Absalom was killed in battle, and David mourned the death of his son. Any parent who has ever dealt with a rebellious teenager or an out-of-control young adult offspring can identify with David's plight. We are vulnerable to those we truly love. When they disappoint us or betray us, the hurt runs deep. Parents do everything they can to care for and protect their children. But sometimes their best is not good enough. Ultimately, each of us is responsible for our own actions.

Paul advised the Ephesians to be kind, tenderhearted, forgiving toward one another, loving one another as Christ had loved them. This attitude of mutual caring for one another reflects Christ's attitude toward us and should be expressed among family members, church members and others with whom we associate at work, at school, and at play.

In John's Gospel, Jesus called himself the Bread of Life. He was referring to his sacrifice on behalf of us all. The symbolism is Eucharistic, but it also includes the broader category of spiritual nourishment. We nourish ourselves spiritually in relation to Jesus. He is the one who gives us strength for meeting life's challenges and demands, including dealing with rebellious children, disintegrating marriages, financial losses, health crises, and unanticipated accidents. He is the one who heals our hurts and enables us to forgive those who have hurt us, so that we can share God's love.

August 20, 2006

**Eleventh Sunday after
Pentecost**

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Psalms 111;
Eph. 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

The Things That Matter

Life does not always turn out to be what we had hoped that it would be. We do not always become the persons that we had hoped to become. Either life has failed us or we have failed in life. Or it could be that we have been successful and prosperous in every way. All of our goals have been attained. And yet we are still unsatisfied. We sometimes ask ourselves: was it really worth it? There is still something missing. Eventually we begin to realize that outer circumstances cannot satisfy our inner needs. Life in the spirit is not determined by outer success or failure.

Paul told the Ephesians to not get drunk on wine but to be filled with the Spirit. Getting drunk may seem like a viable alternative for dulling that sense of failure and dissatisfaction. But when we sober up, the same old problems and circumstances continue to confront us. The alternative is to be filled with the Spirit. The Spirit-led and the Spirit-filled are enabled to give thanks for everything, regardless of outer circumstances or consequences.

When God offered to grant Solomon anything that he wanted, Solomon asked for the wisdom to govern his people. The secret of Solomon's success lay in his choosing the thing that most mattered. Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom (rule) of God and the rest will be given to you." (Matt. 6:33) Paul would say, "Instead be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18). First things first. Get your priorities straight. Then everything else will take care of itself.

August 27, 2006

**Twelfth Sunday after
Pentecost**

1 Kings 8:22-30; 41-43; Psalm 84;
Eph. 6:10-20; John 6:56-59

Strength to Face Life's Challenges

When I heard the live radio broadcast of the United States' bombing of Iraq, following the tragic circumstances of 9/11, my immediate reaction was to pray, "God have mercy on us." Setting aside the question of whether or not it was a justifiable response to the terrorist attacks in our country and a necessary means of preventing further aggression, we must admit that war is a terrible thing.

If we are not careful, we become like the enemy we are trying to defeat. We become our own worst enemy when we fail to realize that "our fight is not against human foes," but against powers and principalities, destructive forces, and vengeful attitudes that serve to make matters worse and escalate the conflict between opposing forces.

The cartoon character Pogo reported, "We have found the enemy and he is us." The real enemy does not exist out there somewhere, across the ocean in a far away land, or in some terrorist group lurking in the shadows of our own nation. The real enemy lies within.

It is only by finding our strength in the Lord that this enemy who attacks from within can be defeated. The whole armor of God includes truth, righteousness, readiness to proclaim the gospel, faith, salvation, and the Word of God.

These inner attitudes and dispositions provide us with the necessary equipment for coping with the enemy that attacks from within.

September 3, 2006

**Thirteenth Sunday after
Pentecost (Labor Day
Sunday)**

Sol. 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9; James
1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

It's Not the Package But the Contents

One of my supervisors once told me that appearances are everything. According to him, looking competent was more important than being competent. The Pharisees seemed to have a similar philosophy.

Keeping up appearances is a top priority in many people's lives. Indeed, the packaging often has more to do with determining the sale of a product than the actual contents. But new life in Christ is more than just keeping up appearances and attractive packaging.

Some Pharisees complained to Jesus that his disciples were not observing the custom of ceremonially washing their hands and their food as required by their laws. They may have been sincere in their efforts to live a life of obedience to the laws and customs of their people. But they had devised a complicated system that went into such great detail and was so cumbersome that not even they could fully follow its directives. They concentrated on outward behavior, because to them image was everything.

But Jesus reminded the Pharisees that there is more to living a life of faithfulness to God than keeping up appearances. They had exchanged the true doctrines of God for humanly contrived customs and traditions. And yet it's what's inside that counts. It's not the package but the contents that are most important. The attitudes and tendencies that arise from within can defile us far more than any failure to follow outward ritual observances. God looks on the heart, because God knows that our inner disposition determines our outward behavior.

September 10, 2006

**Fourteenth Sunday after
Pentecost**

Proverbs 22:1-2; 8-9; 22-23; Psalm
125 or 124; James 2:1-10, 14-17;
Mark 7:24-37

Attitudes Toward the Poor

For a number of years I was the pastor of an older downtown church that was often frequented by street people looking for assistance. A member of the clergy staff volunteered to assume responsibility for working with them. In addition to food and medical care, he was able to find some of the street people places to live and even jobs. As senior pastor, I had fewer interactions with these people, but I always treated them with respect. And some of them came to our worship services—not because they were looking for a handout, but because they wanted to worship and saw our church as their church.

We must not look down on those who are less fortunate than we are. We could just as easily be the ones who are looking for help. Most people are only a few paychecks from defaulting on their mortgage, exhausting their savings and being on the street. The loss of a job or a catastrophic illness can quickly put us in that situation.

When the Syrophenician woman approached Jesus on behalf of her daughter, he responded in an apparently sarcastic manner. The Jews referred to her people as "Gentile dogs." So, Jesus raised the issue of whether or not it was lawful to give the children's food (the Jews being God's children) to dogs. But the woman's good-natured response and her persistence in seeking his help enabled Jesus to demonstrate that where God is concerned there are no second-class citizens. Everyone is entitled to receive God's help.

September 17, 2006

**Fifteenth Sunday after
Pentecost**

Prov. 1:20-23; Psalm 19; James 3:1-
12; Mark 8:27-38

The Power of Speech

With the publication of the book, *The Da Vinci Code* and the release of the movie, as well as several other books, there have been lively discussions regarding the true nature and identity of Jesus. But we have in the New Testament reliable information based on the testimony of people who actually witnessed these events and reflected upon what they had seen, heard and felt. The four canonical Gospels were written generations earlier

than the more questionable Gnostic texts. The letters of Paul were written to young churches that were already in existence twenty years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Eyewitnesses to these events were still living who could verify the truth of the claims made about Jesus.

Jesus asked his disciples what people were saying about his true identity. Then, he asked them an even more important question, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter, affirmed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus commended him for the revelation that he had received, but a short time later was scolding him for not thinking the way God thinks regarding another matter.

Through our speech we can give expression to faith or doubts. With our words we can create clarity or confusion, bring forth blessings or curses. James described the tongue as an unbridled horse that has a tendency to get out of control. But with God's help we can use the power of speech to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and encourage others to have faith in him.

September 24, 2006

**Sixteenth Sunday after
Pentecost**

Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; (UM
Hymnal 738) James 34:13-4:3, 7-8;
Mark 9:30-37

Greatness Defined as Servanthood

We had a weekend emphasis on witnessing at our church that culminated in a dinner and an evening program. The leader of the event told the people working in the kitchen that they should stop their work and join him for the program because that was more important. One woman was especially distressed by his attitude. But I told her that her work in the kitchen was just as important as his work before the crowd, because without her work the crowd would not have been able to gather for the meal and participate in the program. Years later, she told me that my words contributed to her gaining a new understanding of what it means to serve the Lord. The industrious woman described in Proverbs 31 serves as another illustration of the importance of fulfilling practical respon-

sibilities. "She . . . does not eat the bread of idleness" (Prov. 31:27).

When Jesus told his disciples that the Son of Man would be betrayed, killed, and would rise again, they didn't seem to understand. They were preoccupied with the question of who among them was the greatest disciple, and, therefore, the most deserving of honor and respect. But Jesus defined true greatness in terms of servanthood. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). Instead of competing for positions of leadership, they should have been competing for opportunities to serve one another. Those who gladly serve the Lord in whatever capacity they are assigned are the ones that Jesus considers to be truly great.

October 1, 2006

**Seventeenth Sunday after
Pentecost
(World Communion Sunday)**

Est. 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; Psalm 124,
James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Dare to Make a Difference

Some newcomers to town approached our church seeking help with the rent and to buy food. Our church rallied to their aid. But a pastor from another denomination, whose church was located across the street from where these people lived, came to me and said that our church had no business helping them. "They were in our neighborhood and if they needed help, we would have given it to them," he said. Apparently that pastor was embarrassed because his congregation had missed an opportunity to help someone in need.

When his disciples saw someone casting out demons in Jesus' name, they complained to Jesus because this person was not a member of their circle. But Jesus said that those who are not working against him are working for him. No one church or denomination has a monopoly on doing good works in Jesus' name. If people are helped and the name of the Lord Jesus is lifted up, then we should be grateful for their ministry.

Jesus said that we are called to make a difference, to be salt and light for the world. In biblical times salt was used for medicinal purposes, as well as a food

preservative and a seasoning. When thrown on the footpath, it inhibits the growth of weeds. Salt serves many purposes. In our efforts to be salt for the world, to preserve and promote life instead of devouring and destroying it, we should not be jealous of those who express their saltiness in ways that are different from ours. □

Robert V. Dodd is a member of the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church and has served as a pastor for thirty-one years. Author of several books, he lives in Matthews, North Carolina.



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October 8, 2006

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Ps. 26 (UMH 756); Heb. 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

Children in God's Kingdom

"He deserved to die that way," a little girl once told me, referring to a picture of Jesus on the cross. "Why do you say that?" I asked her. "Because he drove people out of the church with a whip, when they were just doing the best that they could." She was obviously thinking about Jesus' chasing the money changers out of the temple courts.

Children do not think like adults and we should not assume that they do. Children believe in a rather simple system of rewards and punishments. If you are good you are rewarded and if you are bad you are punished. For someone to have suffered the terrible fate that Jesus experienced, he must have done something wrong. A recent Sunday school lesson described his clearing the temple. She concluded that this must have been why he was being punished. Many of the Jews in Jesus' day held a similar point of view. But the book of Job, the oldest in the Bible, tells us that the cause of suffering is not so easily explained. And we know that Jesus died for our sins, not his.

When some parents brought their children for Jesus to bless, the disciples tried to send them away. But Jesus insisted on seeing and blessing the children. He even said that being like children is a prerequisite for being a part of God's kingdom. Children are eager to learn and willing to trust. We need to express a similar attitude toward Jesus.

October 15, 2006

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Ps. 22:1-15 ;Heb. 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

The God of Infinite Possibilities

A man once addressed Jesus as "Good Teacher," and Jesus wanted to know why the man had called him good. Since only God is truly good, was the man suggesting that Jesus was God? The man wanted Jesus to tell him how to inherit eternal life. Surely he must have believed that Jesus was somehow closely related to the divine, if he thought that Jesus could answer his question.

The man had obeyed the commandments and lived a morally upright life. So, Jesus told him to sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor. Then, he would be free to follow Jesus. But the man trusted his wealth more than he trusted Jesus. So, Jesus observed that it was extremely difficult for a rich person to enter God's kingdom. It'd be far easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. When his disciples wanted to know who then could ever hope to be saved, Jesus said that all things are possible with God. We cannot save ourselves, but God can. God has resources that we do not have.

Sometimes we underestimate God's ability to help us. We say to ourselves, "God couldn't possibly help me with this problem. My sins are too vile, my problems are too complicated, my burdens are too cumbersome, and my will is too weak." But no matter how great our challenges may be, God is greater. No matter how complicated our life becomes, the solution can be found in our relationship with Jesus Christ. He will give us the strength, the guidance and the encouragement to cope with life's difficulties.

October 22, 2006

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Job 38:1-7, (34-31); Ps. 104:1-9, 24, 35c (UMH 826); Heb. 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

The Disciple Who Is Greatest

Sometimes we get jealous when others

in the church receive more credit or recognition than we do. We are tempted to feel overlooked and unappreciated. We are jealous of the attention that others receive. Jesus' first disciples were just as human as we are. They sometimes competed with one another for Jesus' attention. They were eager to excel in discipleship, but they didn't understand the full meaning of discipleship.

James and John wanted to be seated in positions of honor at Jesus' side when his kingdom was fully established. . But Jesus asked them if they were able to drink from his cup and undergo his baptism. They did not understand what they were asking. To be with Jesus is to risk experiencing all manner of trial and tribulation, and eventually suffering and death, before we experience resurrection. We like to think that we are somehow immune, or can manage to avoid the trials and suffering. But Jesus was not immune, why should we hope to be?

The cup that Jesus mentioned was the cup of suffering and his baptism was a baptism of rejection and death. But Paul said that we must suffer with Christ in order to be glorified with him. (See Romans 8:17)

The other disciples were jealous because they did not think to ask Jesus for special recognition that would indicate their greatness. But Jesus defined true greatness in terms of servanthood. He said that he had come not to be served, but to serve others. His real followers will express a similar attitude.

October 29, 2006

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Ps. 34:1-8 (19-22) (UMH 769); Heb. 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52

Christ, the Great Intercessor

After a colleague in ministry had recovered from a heart attack, I asked him how his experience had affected his prayer life.

He told me that it hadn't even occurred to him to pray for himself throughout his ordeal, because he felt so sustained by the prayers of others. There are times when the prayers of others can help us more than our own prayers, and times when our prayers can help others more than their prayers for themselves.

An intercessor is someone who stands in for or speaks on behalf of someone else.

Intercessory prayer involves seeking God's presence, forgiveness, strength, help, guidance and blessings on behalf of others. Hebrews tells us that Christ is engaged in an eternal priesthood in which he always lives to intercede for others as they approach God through him.

The Protestant Reformation made popular the concept of "the priesthood of all believers." Many people assume that this refers to the idea that we can approach God directly through Christ and do not need any other human beings to intercede for us. But it also refers to our responsibility to be priests to one another and to pray for one another by approaching God on behalf of others. That is why I have always encouraged those for whom I had pastoral responsibility to remember me in their prayers. It is also why I consistently prayed through the membership roles several times each year. When we seek God's presence on behalf of others we reflect the heavenly role of Christ, the Great Intercessor.

November 5, 2006

**Twenty-second Sunday after
Pentecost**

All Saints Sunday

Ruth 1:1-18; Ps. 146 or UMH 858;
Heb. 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34

The Greatest Commandment

The Ten Commandments were originally short simple sayings that were later elaborated upon. In an attempt to cover every possible detail concerning keeping the commandments, over six hundred

specific additional rules and regulations had been added to the original ten by the time Jesus began his earthly ministry.

Once a scribe, who was engaged in a debate with another scribe regarding religious law, asked Jesus which commandment took priority over all the rest. Unless we understand the subtle sense of humor that Jesus often expressed we will not fully appreciate our Lord's response. Jesus told him that the Greatest Commandment is to love God with the totality of your being. He was quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, words which were familiar to all Jews, because they had been taught them from childhood. Jesus expressed his humor when he implied that another greatest or first commandment requires us to love or care for our neighbors as much as we love or care for ourselves. (See Leviticus 19:18)

Love for God and love for our neighbors encompasses all of the original Ten Commandments. The first four commandments concern our relationship with God. The final six commandments concern our relationship with other people. The scribe was impressed with Jesus' answer and Jesus told him that he was close to God's kingdom.

Hebrews 9 describes Jesus' divine priestly role and the superiority of his sacrifice. Mark 12 shows Jesus as the law giver who succinctly gives the people the law of love for God and neighbor. Both demonstrate how Jesus fulfills or completes the religious system previously established.

November 12, 2006
**Twenty-third Sunday after
Pentecost**

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Ps. 127 or UMH
777; Heb. 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Leaders Held Accountable

Jesus warned his followers to beware of the scribes who like to dress in their religious finery, demand to be respected and

given preferential seating at gatherings, but take advantage of widows and pray long prayers to impress others. These religious leaders' words and actions were not in agreement. Therefore, Jesus said that they would be held more accountable than others. Why? Because they claimed to be representing God and to serve as Israel's finest examples of what it meant to be devoted to God.

Those who are in positions of leadership are held to a higher standard of conduct than other people. They are just as human as the rest of us, but the accountability to higher standards is a part of the responsibility of leadership. That is why the process of becoming an ordained minister takes so long. It is not just a matter of getting an education, or developing skills for ministry. The extended period of time gives those who aspire to religious leadership the opportunity to repeatedly reconsider whether or not they want to assume positions that demand higher standards of accountability.

The higher standards of leadership should also influence the political arena. Our elected officials are supposed to serve as public servants instead of using their positions of influence to garnish favors and line their own pockets.

Whenever one of our leaders, either religious or political, fails or disappoints us in some way, we feel it more deeply because we had expected more of them. We expected them to be better informed, wiser and more committed to doing what is right than the rest of us.

November 19, 2006
**Twenty-fourth Sunday after
Pentecost**

Thanksgiving Sunday

1 Sam. 1:4-20; 1 Sam. 2:1-10 or UMH
834; Heb. 10:11-14, (15-18), 19-25;
Mark 13:1-8

The One Perfect Sacrifice

Because Hannah was unable to have

children, she sought a blessing from Eli the priest. In her society, for a woman to not have children meant that she had not fulfilled her purpose in life. She told Eli that if the Lord gave her a son she would dedicate him to God. Soon after Samuel was born Hannah left him in care of Eli, so that he could be raised as an apprentice to the priest. Samuel grew up to become one of Israel's greatest and most influential religious leaders. But the priestly system of religious sacrifice in which he grew to maturity would someday come to an end.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus, the Great High Priest, made the one perfect and complete sacrifice for sins, so that no other ritual sacrifice is required. He opened a way for us to experience God's grace through his own flesh and blood. Jesus would be the ultimate sacrifice and there would no longer be a need for the temple as a reminder of the priestly sacrificial system.

Mark's gospel tells us how Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple when the disciples were so impressed with its architectural grandeur. Nothing made by human hands lasts forever. And yet we assume that things will always be the way that they have always been. We resist change because change confronts us with the unknown. When the disciples wanted to know when the temple would be destroyed, Jesus warned of people making false claims about him and said that there would be wars and rumors of wars. Then he said that this would be only the beginning of things to come.

November 26, 2006

Last Sunday after Pentecost/ Christ the King

2 Samuel 23:1-7; Ps. 132:1-12, (13-18) or UMH 849; Rev. 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

Who Is Jesus?

A television program explored so-

called secret teachings that were left out of the Bible, presumably because they were too shocking to be included. But the truth is that what the gospels and epistles tell us about Jesus is the most reliable information on earth. And the most shocking discovery of all is that the things that scripture tells us about Jesus really are true.

When Jesus walked the earth there was always speculation concerning his true identity. No one had ever loved, lived, said or done things like Jesus. We proclaim him to be our Savior and Lord, the Christ who is also the Son of God. But others are still trying to find out for themselves who Jesus is.

When Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate, Pilate asked him, "Are you king of the Jews?" But Jesus told Pilate that he did not need to fear losing his political authority just yet. The kingdom over which Jesus reigned did not derive its identity or power from this world. Then, he said that those who are open to the truth would listen to him. (See John 18:37)

Pilate could find no laws that Jesus had broken and tried to have him released, but the crowd demanded that he release the thief Barabbas instead. Had Pilate been sincerely open to God's truth, he would have fallen at Jesus' feet and worshiped him. Eventually there will come a time when everyone will bow and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. (See Philippians 2:11) On this Christ the King Sunday, we anticipate and affirm that cosmic event.