

Time after Pentecost - Lectionary 26 8:15/11:00 AM Sunday, September 26, 2010  
The Rev. Dr. C. Gerald Christianson Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Psalm 146;  
I Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:10-31

Thank you Trinity for this honor and it touches me that you invited me to come here today. Over the years I have kept up a relationship with this church not only because of services like this, but because I have to admit that it is kind of self advertising. All of your staff, except Tim and the former bishop, have been students of mine. I am proud of that! It is good to be back and it is good to have an opportunity to worship with you.

I can tell now about my cruise this week. We could talk about the evils of wealth, we could also talk about the mood trips of hell (maybe that would get me into deep trouble, or maybe not), but I want to go somewhere more deeply than that. Perhaps these others would be a little bit bias.

The recent bishop of Harrisburg was the director of Mt. Saint Mary's Seminary in Maryland and I had the chance to interview him for the radio. He told me about two instances. The first time was about when he was a young priest studying in Rome and he came down one morning to 6:00 Mass and there sitting in the very first row was the Blessed Mother Theresa. I should ask Bill how it feels to preach in front of his seminary professor, and then add to that the fact that Mother Theresa might be present. The other time that the former bishop of the Harrisburg Diocese met Mother Theresa was when she visited the shrine in Emmitsburg, Maryland. She came there on a retreat. She has nothing, so as a gift to the Seminary for being the host for her and her sisters, she left them a little card - about this size. I think it is a Psalm, rather than a prayer. The one she gave to the rector was deep in body. Underneath were the words, "Where were you in my time of need?" She had written in her own handwriting, "Be the One."

How are we to be the one to fight the good fight? Let's deal not with just one manner. The question with or without love, or with or without money. With or without a picture of hell or Hades. Let's deal with the fundamental, really fundamental, personal and very modern question, "How are we to be authentic?" I would like to suggest that there are three things that we should keep in mind to be authentic disciples. First, is knowledge a great separation? You and I are good people, aren't we, most of the time? We try hard to support, comfort, and yes to contribute substantially from our wealth. But who can account for the abuse of power in public office, like those officers that were indicated in Belle, California, you can account for the murder of students at Gettysburg College, and for the death of a baby. Who can account for these things?

The great writer and defender of the Christian movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century said, "There is one doctrine in the Christian faith that is monstrous, and that is the doctrine of sin." I think we had a point. Recently when we had a guest preacher in my home church, St. James in Gettysburg, the preacher was trying to tell us that the world is full of suffering, and personal tragedy. At that moment, and it often

happens since we are downtown right on a corner, an ambulance came by and the siren broke out. I thought to myself he could have stopped for a moment, paused, and then said, "See." Because, in fact, there are always these moments, of all kinds.

Have you heard of the play, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Park?" It is a familiar story and a replay of the first chapter in the book of Genesis. A funny thing happened on the way to the garden. We all want our happiness, we all want our good relationships, we want to be something at work, to have meaning and purpose. We all want our evenings. But at the heart of this story is also the story of brokenness, the origins of which have never fully been explained.

We had terrible storms in Gettysburg this weekend, did you in Camp Hill? Short, sudden, violent, but maybe Gettysburg only has this type of storm – maybe it is a hangover from the battle. But the really big storm in Gettysburg's history happened in 1995. Some people don't even call it a storm. They call it the flood. About three days afterwards, I came out on my upper deck, with my cup of coffee, and there was a little ball of fur on the chair. I could have picked it up with one hand. As soon as I got near, this little creature darted off to the safety of the plants. It was a tiny kitten, far from small, who had involuntarily left the security of its mother, and we could always speculate that this poor little thing who was separated from its family by this great flood. What I am trying to say is this? We cannot, could not, ask this little creature, or the creature ask me, about the origins of our brokenness. Or what drove this little thing from its original Eden. All of us know that such things are buried in the midst of time, and the rising waters of the flood.

What we had, and what we have alone, are our own experiences. The desperate need for forgiveness and restoration, prompted by a great separation. If a great separation, then in the second place, we celebrate the gift of empowerment. There is, as the writer of Timothy says, "Engage in Godliness with contentment." Where does the writer, it could be St. Paul, we are not sure, where does the writer, whoever he is or she is, get that kind of confidence? We know that in Paul's authentic writings, and when we come to that famous story about Lazarus, and in our Lord's Prayer, the confidence comes from the son. Who for our sake, suffered, and rose from the dead. And rose into the future the child of all our faiths.

I have friends, skeptics, poor sports, that tell me the Baltimore Orioles are not doing very well this year. They tell me that they have not done well for the last two decades! I pay no attention, because I have the formula that as sure as I only see a winning Oriole team. I will give you my secret today. Around the ten o'clock news, watch that little bar across the bottom of the TV team that tells you the score of the game. If it turns out that the Orioles are in orange, I know they have won and I'll watch the game. Especially, if you push fast forward and you can see the whole game in half an hour. Now I can sit down and watch this game, even if the evil empire leads by 6 or 7 runs in the seventh game, because I have true faith! Well in the game of fast forward, so is life. No matter what stress comes our way, what doubts we might have about our discipleship, we are empowered to go joyfully on. Because we know the score.

The great separation, a celebration of the gift of empowerment, and finally, we risk all. Eh! Remember those salad days long ago, when we were young, for me it was cynical days between college and seminary, in my twenties, when I heard a wonderful preacher, a great preacher. In the city of Minneapolis, where I went to school, we were promised the next week when he would be preaching on the text, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than a rich person to go into the kingdom of heaven." He said he would be preaching on the text and why it was possible for a wealthy person to get into heaven. That is when my cynicism came up. I thought to myself, what would be my title if I gave that sermon. While being the know-it all spirit that I was, I would have said, "Build a bigger needle!" or "Breed a smaller camel." We can't get around the fact that the Bible is straight forward, about the fact that it is difficult to get into heaven with wealth. The problem is, all of us are wealthy, when it comes to people like our African students at Gettysburg Seminary, who can compare our wealth to what they have in their lives.

But still, I think when I made this cynical title, I was missing the point. Because the word here, wealth or no wealth, the word is all. As disciples we must give more than words. More than deeds. We must give the greatest gift that we possess of all, ourselves. But how, how are we to be authentic disciples? That takes us back to the very beginning. By now I hope there is a difference and the difference is this. If the son makes us free, we will be free indeed.

Once upon a time when I was a cynical young man in his twenties, who didn't get along to well with his family, was not truly reconciled with his father, was always fighting with his sister, went to college because he did not have anything else to do at the time, and didn't know what he wanted to do at the time, he took this philosophy simply to harass the professor. He made up the most difficult questions he could and at the end he would always say, "Professor, do you think I will ever find God?" It wasn't long before this young man's father died without ever being reconciled. So he went home, and even though he and his sister were estranged, they fell upon each other and while they were entangled in each other's arms, he said, "You know, I never had a chance to speak to my father." His sister said, "No, but at least you came home now." He went to the back to the professor, told of his tragedy, and ended the conversation by saying, "Do you think I will ever find God?" The professor responded, "I can't be sure, but of one thing I am certain, God has already found you."

Separated, yes, yet empowered, we disciples fight the good fight because we risk all. So be the One!

Amen.