

PENTECOST 18B/LECTIONARY 27

October 4, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Genesis 2:18-24 Psalm 8 Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12 **Mark 10:2-16**

One day, the father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country with the express purpose of showing him how poor people live. They spent a couple of days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family.

On their return from their trip, the father asked his son, “How was the trip?”

“It was great, Dad.”

“Did you see how poor people live?” the father asked.

“Oh, yeah,” said the son.

“So tell me, what did you learn from the trip?” asked the father.

The son answered: “I saw that we have one dog and they had four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon. We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, but they have friends to protect them.”

The boy's father was speechless. Then his son added, “Thanks, Dad, for showing me how poor we are.”

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Remember a couple of weeks ago at the baptism of Kristen Emma Lemmerman when I suggested to you that perhaps it would be the little children who would teach us? In this story, we hear of a little boy teaching his father a profound lesson: What's truly important in life.

Last week as we began our *Make It Simple* stewardship campaign, I suggested to you that we should stop to consider “What is enough?” in this life. But it occurs to me that there is a more basic question, and that is this: What's truly important?

In today's Gospel reading we hear another story of the Pharisees coming to Jesus in hope of trapping him with a question. He answers them very directly, citing their own law. While we're not told how they responded, we might well imagine that they were dumbfounded.

But there's a very important reason why this story and what follows – Jesus' admonishment to the disciples to not prevent the children from coming to him – are paired together. The reason is this: While the Pharisees' question pointed to something they considered of ultimate concern, Jesus redirects our attention to what truly is of ultimate concern – that all should come to him in faith. This is what's most important. We are all the “little children” that Jesus would have come to him.

And yet, the troubles of life often present a major stumbling block to having the sort of faith that allows us to trust completely in God's providential care. In today's video, we heard the moving story of one mother pathway to learning to trust completely in God's providential love, and the hard decision she made to turn her drug-addicted son over to God for His safekeeping. We'll hear more from Barb Debski next week.

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Last week at our Lutheran Course session on Thursday I suggested to the participants that we memorize Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*. I made this suggestion so that, among other things, as you pray The Lord's Prayer or say the Creed, these explanations may help deepen your meditative reflection on the depth of meaning these represent, so that it does not just become another rote memorization.

Here's one part that I find particularly meaningful. It always reminds me of the vastness of God's providential care for me. It's Luther's explanation to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

What does this mean?

Answer: I believe that God has created me together with all creatures. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and home, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property – along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. God does all this out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.

This is the ultimate and providential bounty that I believe the little boy in today's story was pointing to. It's the providential care that Barb Debski talked about in today's video. It's the providential care in which we should all place our ultimate hope.

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As you entered worship today, each of you received a little round token with the numbers “10-10-80” on them. This is a principle I've been living by for so long that I take it for granted. But in the last couple of days I've learned that perhaps this principle is not as well-known as I had assumed.

The 10-10-80 principle is simple. It has to do with our personal financial management, or in church-y language, our “financial stewardship.” 10-10-80, when added together, is 100; it represents all of the financial resources we have at our disposal. For years the church has been teaching this principle, but it's application has now spread beyond the church. In the past few years I've seen several financial managers recommending this principle to their clients, Christian or not.

Here's what it means: We are to share 10% of what we have. That's represented by this first bucket. Out of thankfulness for God's providential care for us, for providing all we need for life as Luther so eloquently said in his explanation to the First Article of the Creed. We joyfully share 10% off the top – that's first-fruits giving.

Then, we are to save 10%; that's this second bucket. We save 10% because we're people of hope. We're confident there will be a tomorrow, and it's a future we need to save for in order to continue providing for ourselves and our families.

The remaining 80% is to be spent for everything else. That's bucket #3. We'll call that “Consuming.”

This is what 10-10-80 is about.

Now, here's what's new and different... We're going to take bucket #3 and divide it into two. We've still got the “Consuming” bucket, but we're going to add a fourth bucket – this one we'll call “Providing.”

What I challenge you to do is this: Get two buckets. Label one “Consuming” and the other “Providing.” For the next two weeks, save receipts for every purchase you make. If it's something for which you don't get a receipt – for instance, a soda purchased out of a machine at your workplace – write a receipt yourself. All of these receipts will be divided between these two buckets.

Of course, we want to affirm your disciplined and intentional efforts to provide for our households. So, into the “Providing” bucket would go such expenses such as rent or mortgage payments, utilities bills, food receipts, whatever else you consider necessary to providing the basics for you and your family.

But you also want to scrutinize what goes into the “Consuming” bucket. For instance, things that might go into this bucket are receipts for the stop at Starbucks or Dunkin Donuts on the way to work, CDs or DVDs purchased, whatever else is not necessary to providing the basics for yourself and your family.

As I alluded to in last week's sermon about “What's Enough?” we've all been so indoctrinated into our consumer culture that sometimes it's hard for us to discern between what we need, versus what we want. That's where this exercise can be insightful.

Take again the example of my neighbors: Is a new car every other year a *need*, or is it just a want? If one needs a car to drive to and from work, take the kids to school and activities, and to run errands, then no – one probably doesn't *need* a new car every other year. On the other hand, a new car every two years may be necessary to providing life's necessities if one is a realtor or a traveling salesperson. It's quite possible that for these people a new car every two years is a matter of providing basics to their families. So, how to divide the receipts between these two buckets is entirely up to your judgment. You know your situations best.

I am interested to hear from any of you who decide to take up this challenge. I hope what you'll discover is that God does, indeed, providentially and abundantly provide for all of life's basic necessities. I hope this exercise will help you live a life filled with an increasing amount of gratitude for God's gracious providence. And most of all, I hope that, as a “little child” in Christ, it will help you to deepen your faith in God's providential care for you.

Amen.

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