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Preaching From a Biblical Anthropology: Sources and Methods for Correlating the Gospel and the Human Condition

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PREACHING FROM A BIBLICAL ANTHROPOLOGY:
SOURCES AND METHODS FOR CORRELATING THE GOSPEL
AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

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ABSTRACT

Preaching from a Biblical Anthropology: Sources and Methods for Correlating the Gospel and the Human Condition

by

Rev. Paul N. D. Miller

Preachers' understandings of the human condition are foundational to preaching that is faithful and effective, yet are often unreflective or dogmatic. Biblical anthropology provides both revelation about humankind and a variety of perspectives, aiding the preacher in addressing diverse situations. Topics explored: Old Testament anthropology undergirding the New; the fundamental unity of the human being; the differentiation of law, sin, and human nature; the doctrine of theological anthropology; law and gospel preaching. Research draws on preachers' journals and listener feedback surveys to identify and demonstrate patterns of creative proclamation of the human situation and a corresponding Gospel response.

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This research project could not have happened without the preachers who agreed to engage these ideas with me and journal about them. I had to promise that they would remain anonymous, but... you know who you are.

Thanks also to the people of St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Canyon Lake, Texas. Thanks are due to the staff and the Council members from the years I was in this program for their support, and to my Parish Response Group for their generosity with their time and their willingness to share thoughts and feedback.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	vi
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	vii
 1. INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM, JUSTIFICATION, AND RATIONALE.....	 1
The Human Condition as Key to Faithful and Effective Preaching	2
Why <i>Biblical</i> Anthropology?	9
 2. THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK	 14
The Bible as Source.....	15
The Old Testament as Foundational Anthropology	15
The Old Testament as Diverse Treasury of Reflection	23
The New Testament and the Humanity of Christ.....	30
The Correlation of the Gospel and the Human Condition in Scripture.....	35
Theological Developments	40
Biblical Anthropology in the Early Church	40
Reformation Preaching and the Human Condition	51
 3. LITERATURE REVIEW	 61
In Dialogue with Post-Enlightenment Anthropology	61
Reclaiming Law and Gospel	67
The “Fallen Condition Focus”	74
 4. PROJECT DESCRIPTION.....	 76
Overview of Research Tools	77
Methodology and Assessment.....	80
 5. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS	 84
Preachers’ Influences and Commitments	84
Sermon Entries - Overview	89
Strategies	90
Promising Approaches	90
The “Neutral/Negative” Strategy	94
The “Human Condition Focus,” with Neutral, Negative, and Positive Statements	97

Case Studies – What Did They Hear?	99
6. EVALUATION.....	103
The Preachers Reflect on Their Experience	103
Evaluating the Research Process	106
Avenues for Further Study	108
Conclusions	110
7. REFLECTION	113
APPENDIX A	121
APPENDIX B	122
APPENDIX C	123
APPENDIX D	160
APPENDIX E	167
APPENDIX F.....	196
WORKS CITED	199
WORKS CONSULTED	201

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FCF	Fallen Condition Focus
HCF	Human Condition Focus
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Tables

Table 1: Dynamics of Proclamation in Pre-exilic and Exilic Prophets (Steinke).....	36
Table 2: Analysis of Pre-exilic and Exilic Prophetic Responses (Brueggemann).....	36
Table 3: The Gospel Correlated to the Human Situation in Romans 5-8	37
Table 4: Stuempfle's Analysis and Examples of the Law/Gospel Dynamic.....	69
Table 5: W. Paul Jones' Analysis of "Theological Worlds"	70
Table 6: The "Neutral/Negative" Preaching Strategy	95
Table 7: The "Human Condition Focus" as a Preaching Strategy	98
Table 8: Examples of the "Human Condition Focus" as a Tool for Preaching	112

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM, JUSTIFICATION, AND RATIONALE

Travelling in Peru, I was able to worship in a local church, a large congregation that is part of a Pentecostal movement originating in Brazil. The guest preacher, from Brazil, took up the topic of famine. His primary text was Genesis 12:10: “Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land” (NRSV). Building on that verse and the narratives before and after it, he invited listeners to reflect on their experience of famine, crisis, and vulnerability. He developed the theme: When we are not currently experiencing famine, how does the fear of famine shape our decisions? How does famine or the fear of it affect our trust in God, and how might our faith affect our fear? He set Abram and Sarai’s experience next to Naomi and Ruth’s in the book of Ruth. Do we experience famine as if we have failed? Do we draw close to God in those times, or push away? Famine and the fear of it emerged as experiences that bind all of humankind together, even as he began to lay out a gospel response rooted in John 6 and Philippians 4.

It is hard to evaluate sermons, especially across boundaries of culture and theological tradition; all preaching is contextual and I was not part of the primary context. Some things in the sermon struck me as odd or even inappropriate. However, there was much that drew my attention and held it, and much to stimulate thought and faith. It would be hard not to consider the sermon a success, since it both built up my faith and stirred reflection on what makes for good preaching. I found myself wondering: Why

have I never noticed that, as soon as they arrived in the land promised to them, a place of blessing, Abram, Sarai, and Lot encountered a famine? That seems significant – is there something in my tradition or training that has kept me from noticing that important detail? Further, why have I never heard a sermon on the topic of famine? The word “famine” occurs around 100 times in most translations of the Bible. Why is that basic human experience being overlooked? While this sermon might not have met all of my ideal standards for what biblical preaching should be, perhaps it was biblical in a way that my sermons, and most of the sermons I am hearing, are not.

The Human Condition as Key to Faithful and Effective Preaching

The faithfulness and effectiveness of sermons is a big topic, and most preachers and listeners to sermons might, at some point, throw up their hands and speak of an indescribable alchemy – or, more piously, might speak vaguely of the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. Yet, we do have commitments about what makes sermons faithful, and there are ways to judge their effectiveness.

In my Lutheran tradition, two characteristics stand out as the marks of faithfulness in preaching: that the content of the sermon be the *gospel* – that its message is good news about Jesus Christ – and that it is *biblical*. The question of effectiveness has not gotten as much attention in most traditions. Either the faithful word is assumed to be effective, in the tradition associated with the likes of Karl Barth,¹ or preachers are encouraged, rather unreflectively, to pursue whatever seems to work best, in the tradition associated with the

¹ "Proclamation is human language in and through which God Himself speaks, like the king through the mouth of his herald." Barth, quoted in Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 23.

likes of Charles Grandison Finney.² In this thesis, I am proposing that the key factor linking faithfulness and effectiveness is the sermon's implied or stated articulation of the human condition.

Every sermon contains assumptions about the human condition – what are the basic human experiences, what we all have in common, what makes us human. These make up the sermon's *anthropology*. If the sermon is at all theological in its content, then it must also address who we are as human beings in relation to God (*coram Deo*). Assumptions about humanity in relation to God make up the sermon's *theological anthropology*. These assumptions may be stated or unstated, but they are foundational to whatever else is said.

That foundational understanding of who we humans are and who we are *coram Deo*, then, is a key factor in setting a sermon on a path to effectiveness or ineffectiveness in the lives of listeners; the degree to which listeners give a hearing to what is said may be determined by their ability to accept and relate to the sermon's assumptions or implications about the human experience.

In order to be *faithful* preaching – preaching of the gospel – the main message must remain the good news about Jesus Christ. Yet the gospel is always a *response*, like the solution to a problem, or the answer to a question. What is the problem, and what is the question? The problem or question to which the gospel responds is found in the reality of human experience. How the gospel is proclaimed is the heart of the sermon, but how the human condition is understood in a sermon lays the foundation: Does this

² "Under [Finney's] leadership, revivalism became a pragmatic science of mass persuasion." In Richard Lischer, *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 132.

articulation of the good news answer the questions of human experience? Does this gospel solution correlate with the human predicament needing to be solved? The proclamation of the gospel is the goal of an effective sermon, but if listeners cannot accept the premise, they will get no benefit from the conclusion. Therefore, connecting with human experience is the essential foundation of an effective proclamation of the gospel.

The second mark of faithfulness in preaching is that a sermon is biblical. Biblical preaching begins from the texts of Scripture, engages specific texts while taking into account the message of the Bible as a whole, and derives its theology from Scripture as both source and norm. As it provides the foundation for effective gospel preaching, attention to the human condition can set biblical preaching on the path to effectiveness: What in the biblical witness do we all recognize in our own lives? What about my experience is given clarity through the lens of Scripture? If listeners recognize the truth about themselves in the text, they are ready to hear what else it may say.

Any given text for preaching promotes, implies, or favors certain understandings of the human condition. This presents a challenge to the committed biblical preacher. Certain biblical articulations make more intuitive sense to people in a given time, place, and culture; others may be accepted with explanation and persuasion; while still others will likely meet resistance and may be rejected. The preachers themselves (since preachers too are products of their context) will have to grow in their ability to notice, understand, and interpret biblical understandings of humanity that may be alien to their own assumptions. Only then can the preacher begin the task of representing those understandings to listeners in understandable and persuasive ways.

There are many biblical articulations of the human condition, and still more understandings and perspectives are implied. Certain articulations have received more attention and emphasis in the life the church than others – this is the result of various historical factors and traditional approaches, but most important in preaching are the training of the interpreter and her or his own life experiences and assumptions.

Preachers bring an understanding of the human condition to every step of the preaching task. This understanding is sometimes explicit but often implicit in sermons; it may be arrived at through conscious reflection or absorbed unconsciously; it may conform to an articulated theological standard or may be shaped by a gut feeling; it may correspond to the dominant themes of Scripture, or to an underrepresented or dissenting view, or it may come from a non-biblical source. Whether stated or not, intentional or not, articulated or not, consistent or not, conventional or not, traditional or not, orthodox or not – a preacher’s understanding of human experience will shape every aspect of preaching.

A common pattern for preachers is to have one dominant understanding of the human condition and theological anthropology that they bring to nearly every sermon. Often this understanding arises from a confessional articulation, or from a key theological insight of a favorite theologian, or from the perspective of a favorite biblical author. That confessional tradition, theological insight, or biblical book or books are then brought into conversation with the biblical texts for preaching. This approach has the advantage of starting out with the benefit of others’ mature reflection on theological anthropology, but it can come as no surprise if the biblical texts are often stretched and bent to fit into the frameworks of the preacher’s dominant understanding. Human identity is helpfully

summarized in theological and confessional statements, but a preacher needs to acknowledge that these encapsulations do not fully capture the elusive totality of human identity, nor the complexity of the Scriptures. The preacher needs to acknowledge the width and breadth of the biblical witness to human experience while reaching listeners in a variety of life situations, listeners who hold a variety of opinions about and interpretations of their own identity and relationship to God.

Most preachers would acknowledge another common pattern: simply not to think much about the issues of theological anthropology and the shared human experience. So long as these issues do not rise to a conscious level, they are not required to articulate any particular position. In the resulting sermons, the proclamation may connect with scriptural and theological themes about human nature – but it may not. Without an articulation of the human condition guiding preaching, cultural assumptions are easily and unconsciously incorporated into preaching. For example, most mainline Protestant churchgoers can likely relate to hearing sermons that affirm the basic goodness and equality of all people, while acknowledging that “nobody’s perfect.” Herman Stuempfle writes:

Nothing is more certain than the fact that *some* theology will surface in every sermon. The danger is that it will do so without prior reflection... Unintended ‘theologies’ will begin to dominate our preaching and to distort or even subvert the distinctive Word we are called to proclaim. When we take time to subject our past preaching to theological analysis, we may be astounded to discover that we have been purveying such strange doctrines as the perfectibility of man and society in history, the immortality of the soul, or the demand to justify oneself before God by moral or spiritual achievement. (emphasis original)³

³ Herman G. Stuempfle, *Preaching Law and Gospel* (Ramsey, N.J.: Sigler Press, 1991), 12. Why a preacher might wish to avoid these doctrines will be among the subjects of chapter 2.

Sermons arising from no particular or stated understanding of humanity might sometimes score a “hit” in both faithfulness and effectiveness, but there are many opportunities to “miss”: by simply reaffirming, unchallenged, the assumptions of listeners, for instance, or by missing an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel with depth and power because the depths of human need had not been acknowledged or explored.

Preachers have long been aware of the need for new insight into the human condition. In our day, preachers and the scholars who support them have turned to a variety of fields of inquiry for this insight: the social sciences of psychology, sociology, and anthropology; newer fields like neurobiology, evolutionary biology, and primatology; and the old and reliable standards of philosophy, history, art, music, and literature. Through studies in these fields, we can see what about the human experience has been constructed very differently in different individuals, times, and cultures – those things that seem like universal “anthropological constants,”⁴ but turn out to be specific to a given era, condition, or place. Through this process of elimination, though, we hope also to get some sense of what is core to our shared identity.

All of these fields offer rich and deep insights into human nature and the human experience, even including the human experience of religion and life with God. Yet preachers have a more fundamental tool at their disposal: the scriptures we preach. What if preachers committed to conscious reflection on anthropology, bringing the basic questions of human existence into conversation with biblical texts as a path toward more faithful and more effective preaching?

⁴ Bernd Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 7.

My proposal is to ask a group of preachers to be reflective with me about their assumptions and to try articulating the understanding of the human condition and theological anthropology that shapes their preaching. Specifically, I propose to ask them to focus on how that understanding can arise from the biblical texts that are being proclaimed, and to track how that understanding shapes the process of preaching, from interpretation to sermon to congregational response. Does intentional reflection by preachers on biblical texts, looking there for revelation and reflection about the human condition, lead to preaching that, over time, engages more deeply and broadly with the experience and needs of listeners? Each preacher will benefit from being thoughtful about the range of biblical approaches, perhaps especially those that have often been overlooked in the most traditional articulations; being aware of what understandings are intuitive in her or his congregation and which would require explanation or persuasion; and being intentional about what understanding she or he will use in a given a sermon.

Two paths forward present themselves for the preacher wanting to reflect and connect more deeply with the human condition and the place of humanity *coram Deo*. The first path is to explore the complexity and variety of perspectives to be found in the canonical books. Our canon is a collection of strident, subtle, and complex positions on what it means to be human and the theological implications of our identity. The Old Testament in particular is a treasury of centuries of reflection on life with God in an astounding variety of situations, with diverse systems, both articulated and implied, for understanding who we are as humans, and some common convictions. Even conservative estimates would put the number of different authors represented in the Old Testament into the twenties; the number of perspectives and life-situations represented ranges far

higher. The New Testament, though told through fewer voices, adds additional variety in situation and perspective, particularly due to the mission to the Gentiles, which was a deliberate attempt to transmit the faith transculturally. This effort necessitated the orderly laying out of a Christian theological framework, including the articulation of convictions about the human situation. The New Testament yields riches especially for those willing to set aside traditional and confessional accretions to the familiar narratives and letters, and hear them afresh in their own voice and perspective. It is my hope that a more biblically-informed theology of the human experience will begin to incorporate the complexity and variety needed for proclamation in our time.

The second path forward is to be found in the act of interpretation itself. To interpret a text is to bring it into conversation again with the human experience. Interpretation is certainly a time to bring to bear confessional, traditional, and theological insights, cultural perspectives, and insights from other disciplines, yet it is above all a time for the text to interact with a given preacher, a certain moment in time, and a specific community. Giving more attention to that moment of interpretation – filling it with intentional reflection on human reality, unfettered by other commitments and assumptions – may yield new articulations of the human condition and our place in relation to God that could ground preaching in both biblical truth and lived experience.

Why *Biblical* Anthropology?

The question remains: if our goal as preachers is to expand our range of connection with human experience, and to deepen our reflection on what makes us human, why turn to the Bible? Some might preach drawing their understanding of the human condition only from any variety of extra-biblical sources and taking that as the

problem, then proclaiming a gospel solution drawn from the Bible. The claim can be made that such a sermon is gospel-oriented, and, to the extent that it connects with listeners' own experiences and understandings of themselves, it may be called effective. Certainly, all preachers should collect and consider insights into the human condition from every source available. Yet to take that as our preferred method neglects four important factors that advocate for a biblical understanding of anthropology.

First, as Christians, we ought to bring a healthy suspicion to any human endeavor meant to lead us deeper into our own nature or identity. All the arts and all the sciences, whether social, biological, or medical, are human endeavors. Our awareness of human sin and human limitation would call for an epistemological humility regarding any attempt to make ourselves the objects of our own study. Christian tradition suggests that we ought to mistrust our own ability to see ourselves completely clearly and with unclouded honesty. Martin Luther wrote of human sin in the Smalcald Articles that it “has caused such a deep, evil corruption of nature that reason does not comprehend it; rather, it must be believed on the basis of the revelation in the Scriptures.”⁵ In retrospect, we see that many past formulations of human nature were self-interested and limited by the point of view from which they arose; can we not surmise that our current ones may be equally subjective and, at times, even self-serving? The basic observation that our self-knowledge is limited is at least as old as St. Paul, and perhaps it is not an accident that he used the metaphor of examining oneself: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly...” (I Cor 13:12a NRSV).

⁵ Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 311.

A second factor is the lack of reflection outside the Bible on specifically *theological* anthropology. While much useful insight is to be found in other disciplines into what it means to be human, very little of it delves deeply at all into what it means to be human *coram Deo*, in relationship (or not) to the God of creation. The Bible, on the other hand, is concerned first of all with what it means to be a person relative to God, and concerns itself only secondarily with human realities apart from God. For the preacher, the question of who we are in ourselves is certainly a live question, but the question of who we are *coram Deo* is fundamental to all that preaching seeks to do.

Third, the Bible is simply the richest resource available to preachers. It contains centuries-worth of reflection, the sustained effort of a diverse people across generations and even millennia trying to make sense of their own lives as people of God and recording the results. It is history, law, literature, poetry, biography, philosophy, memoir, hymnody, and prayer – it is indeed entire cultures and worldviews – all held in mutual dialogue within one carefully constructed canon. Without sustained attention, we will only “scratch the surface” of this treasury.

Finally, and most importantly, there is the Christian doctrine of revelation: if we look to the Bible to see God revealed, and look to the Bible for the definitive articulations of the gospel, then why would we not also look there for revelation about our own identity as well? Richard Lischer sees the use of non-biblical sources to establish the human condition in preaching as a step backward from the progress of the Reformation:

Unlike contemporary preaching’s reliance on the social sciences for its interpretation of the human being, Luther’s preaching on the human condition rested on belief. Instead of proceeding from psychological realities and feelings toward faith, he moved from faith to psychological realism. In doing so Luther reversed Scholasticism’s method of establishing the nature of humanity by means of philosophical distinctions. Contemporary dependence on the social sciences to

tell us who we are marks another great reversal, nothing less than a pre-Copernican reversion to a method that antedates Luther.⁶

In other words, all the cultural sources to which we might turn in order to see ourselves better are products of the culture of which we too are a part. Even the greatest of such cultural products have limitations in giving us new perspective on ourselves. An outside perspective is needed, and just as the gospel is a foreign perspective that comes by revelation, so is the revelation of our own identity *coram Deo*.

We experience Scripture as revelation, an “external word,” that is, a message of truth from outside ourselves. Some of what we find there will be alien to our sensibilities; indeed, most of what we find there will be alien to us until we engage the thought-worlds and perspectives from which it arose, but “it is the dissimilarity of the text [to our own assumptions and worldview], rather than our affirmation of [the text], that constitutes the basis of a critical function to correct our view of God and the world.”⁷ The alien nature of the biblical authors’ thought-worlds can actually assist us in concentrating on the universal aspects of the human condition. This doctrine of revelation, therefore, must be held with an important caveat: to experience it as an “external word” “it is essential to understand the conceptual autonomy and dissimilarity of biblical texts and ideas in comparison to our own thought.”⁸ In other words, the doctrine of revelation is a call to critical engagement with open minds, imagination, and humility; not a context-free application of ancient words to current situations, but a willingness to shed limiting

⁶ Richard Lischer, “Luther and Contemporary Preaching: Narrative and Anthropology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36, no. 4 (1983): 493-494.

⁷ Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, 5.

⁸ Ibid.

perspectives and see anew. Practiced in this way, seeking revealed truth about the human situation in the Scriptures will yield insights for the preacher available nowhere else.

The benefits of this study will be to invite preachers into a pattern of reflection on the human condition: a topic that is alive in the discussions of our culture, a doctrine in need of fresh understanding in the church, and thus an essential element of faithful and effective preaching. Participating preachers will join me in developing methods of interpretation for preaching and methods of structuring the dynamic interaction of theological anthropology and gospel proclamation. The end result will be a connection with listeners – some who have not felt a connection to preaching that was too narrow in scope, and others who may be able to connect in new or deeper ways – and thus creating new possibilities for the hearing of the gospel and the consequent transformation of lives by its power.

Reflection on human experience and the human situation is not peripheral to preaching. Not only is it a key component to any theological insight, it is an act of taking preaching seriously as an event in time and as an act of communication. It is an act of taking the listeners seriously. This is especially true in our time, when knowledge of biblical content is not necessarily common, agreement about the nature and function of the Bible is not widely shared, and there is no broad cultural consensus about human nature and purpose. The keys for preachers will be to assume less, to listen more, to broaden perspective, and to acknowledge complexity – using the Scriptures as basis for methods of intentional reflection on human experience in the interpretive process.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

The goal of this thesis is to promote preaching that is faithful and effective: faithful in that it preaches the gospel and engages the Bible, and effective in that it connects to the human condition and thus gains an audience from listeners. I have argued that the Bible provides both a diverse wealth of reflection on human life, especially as it is lived in relationship to God, and revealed truth about the human situation. The *diverse reflection* to be found in Scripture aids the preacher in engaging the width and breadth of the human condition for *effective* preaching; the *revealed truth* about humanity in Scripture aids the preacher as the source and norm of doctrine for *faithful* preaching.

For a preacher who aspires to these goals, the theological heritage of the church is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, theology is indispensable: it provides a guide through the vastness of the biblical witness, holds centuries of wisdom derived from preaching, warns against unfruitful or problematic paths of thought, systematizes and gives focus to biblical reflection, and incorporates reflection on human experiences from the centuries since the canon was closed. On the other hand, theological commitments can come between the interpreter and the text, dimming the intensity of scriptural insights, and discarding other possible touchstones of human experience altogether. While theology at its best enables engagement with scripture, our theological commitments often correspond to our scriptural blind spots. It is for this reason that we will turn first to

consideration of the biblical canon as our source before unpacking the theological tools available to the preacher that underlie methods of biblical interpretation.

With regard to both the Biblical record and the theological tradition, theological anthropology is far too vast a topic for any one thesis. For that reason, attention in this thesis will be given to insights that especially benefit the preacher and key themes that have not been a part of the dominant strains of theology and interpretation.

The Bible as Source

The Old Testament as Foundational Anthropology

The Old Testament provides the biblical preacher with both a great variety of approaches to the articulation of the human condition, and the most complete exposition of the anthropology that is revealed uniquely in the Bible. In *Creation and Law*, Gustav Wingren reflects on the vital function of the Old Testament as the source of anthropology for theology and preaching:

It is only on the basis of the Old and New Testaments together... that it is possible to escape the false alternative of an early Christian faith expressed in a purely theoretical form, or an anthropology derived from philosophy... The Old Testament fulfills the legitimate theological need of an anthropology... The New Testament needs not only its own interpretation of the Old Testament, but also the Old Testament itself. In isolation from the Old Testament, it is in danger of evolving a philosophical anthropology.¹

Looking first to the Old Testament as a whole, an outstanding characteristic of its witness is its almost unanimous perspective, in both statement and assumption, that the human being is essentially a unity. While this perspective may have much in common

¹ Gustaf Wingren, *Creation and Law* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 16-17.

with many pre-historic or traditional societies,² it puts the Old Testament witness in sharp contrast with most Western philosophical traditions, those that do not claim to be Christian along with many of those that do. Many Christian apologists, therefore, who set out to defend and promote a “biblical anthropology” do so without sufficient attention to the Old Testament’s insistence that humans are monochotomous, or fundamentally unified, beings. They accept the premises of the mostly Greek philosophical influences whose language many New Testament authors borrowed, and end up promoting various dichotomous and trichotomous schemas as biblical truth. In doing so, they actually mute the anthropological stance of the Bible that is most foundational and most distinctive. The resulting apologetic becomes a dogmatic commitment to a formula usually consisting of either two or three contrasting words selected from this list: spirit, (rational) soul, mind, (rational) will, heart, body, flesh. As we will see, this is quite a departure from the dominant assumption of the Old Testament.

Following the New Testament writers’ attempts to articulate basic assertions of the faith in in the Greek language and using Greek terms, the early church struggled for centuries with similar tasks, translating the concepts of theological anthropology into new languages and their accompanying systems of thought. This process unfolded with some success, but also a lot of fruitless argument, extending to the present day. However, this basic problem in understanding this essential theme in biblical anthropology is actually older than the New Testament. In the history of Old Testament translations,

The most frequent substantives are as a general rule translated by ‘heart,’ ‘soul,’ ‘flesh,’ and ‘spirit’... [from these translations] misunderstandings arise which

² It may be that what differentiates the Old Testament position from the thought-worlds of traditional societies is its *theological* content, while what differentiates it from the thought-world of ‘modern’ societies, at least from monotheistic modern societies, is largely its *anthropological* content.

have important consequences. These translations go back to the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation, and they lead in a false direction of a dichotomic or trichotomic anthropology, in which body, soul, and spirit are in opposition to one another. The question still has to be investigated of how, with the Greek language, a Greek philosophy has here supplanted Semitic biblical views, overwhelming them with foreign influence... We shall see that the stereotyped translation of a Hebrew term by the same word inevitably leads the understanding astray in most cases.³

The approach that takes most seriously the biblical witness will be the one that clears away the debris of centuries of misunderstanding and instead understands the Old Testament perspective in its own terms. Hans Walter Wolff's *Anthropology of the Old Testament* remains the foundational text for this exercise. The key term *nephesh*, traditionally rendered "soul," he translates as "needy man," with its concrete ties to the throat and neck and more figuratively to desire⁴; humanity in its dependence.⁵ The term *basar*, often rightly translated 'flesh' in that it can refer to meat that is eaten and is a term never used of God⁶, Wolff understands, when it is used of human bodies and more figuratively of human weakness to mean "man in his infirmity."⁷ *Ruach*, traditionally rendered "spirit," Wolff calls "a theo-anthropological term."⁸ With ranges of meaning from wind, breath, or Spirit to "vital powers," "feelings," and "will," Wolff translates it

³ Hans Walter Wolff and Margaret Kohl, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 7-8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-25.

⁵ Clarity in this Hebrew translation also clears up some New Testament problems. *Nephesh* is traditionally rendered *psyche* in Greek, and *psyche* has traditionally been rendered "soul" in English – except in a few of its most famous instances (Mark 8:35 and parallels) when it is rendered "life," a translation perhaps more in keeping with Wolff's conceptual framework. Perhaps this also provides evidence for a Semitic linguistic or philosophical basis for Jesus' words, and a basis for rendering *psyche* more often as "life" or something like it in New Testament translations. Many Christians would indeed be surprised by a call from Jesus to lose their soul "for my sake and for the sake of the gospel..."

⁶ Wolff and Kohl, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26-31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

“man as he is empowered.”⁹ What Wolff calls the “most important word in the vocabulary of Old Testament anthropology”¹⁰ is *leb*, which is most often and most literally translated “heart.” Yet Wolff wants to draw attention to this as a place of thinking, wishing, and decision-making, both as it is applied to God and to humanity, and so he chooses the translation “reasonable man.”¹¹ He goes on to explain the concrete, embodied understanding of the person through the use of terms for breath, blood, bowels, liver, bile, kidneys, limbs, ears, and mouth,¹² and words for the body’s stature, beauty, senses and speech.¹³ A close reading of any translation of the Old Testament gives the reader some sense for this figurative yet shockingly concrete understanding of the embodied human person, but Wolff’s analysis gives the sense that there is a whole worldview waiting to be discovered beneath the overlaying linguistic and cultural accumulations and distortions.

The first chapters of Genesis are the traditional starting point for biblical reflection on human identity, and they are indeed a good place to start – yet the later development of Christian theology came to put the emphasis in these chapters in very different places than the texts themselves may suggest.¹⁴ In Genesis 1 God creates

⁹ Ibid., 32-39.

¹⁰ Ibid., 40.

¹¹ Ibid., 40-58.

¹² Despite these words for different aspects and organs the Bible knows only of a “whole human being.” “It is not the senses that sense, it is not the brain that thinks... it is the entire human being that senses, thinks, acts.” Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, 43.

¹³ Wolff and Kohl, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 59-79.

¹⁴ A classic example of a fresh encounter with these foundational narratives in preaching is Helmut Thielicke, *How the World Began: Man in the First Chapters of the Bible*, trans. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961).

humankind and declares them, along with all of creation, “very good” (Gen. 1:31, NRSV). In later Christian theology, Genesis 1:26 and 27 would become among the most important verses in Bible, especially for theological anthropology:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (NRSV).

Genesis 3 provides the story that traditionally came to be known as “the Fall,” introducing the reality of sin through the disobedience of the first people, and suggesting the corruption of human nature. These two chapters and two themes – the image of God in humanity in Genesis 1, and the Fall of humanity in Genesis 3, encompassing the best and worst of human potential – have been the basis of much of Christian theological reflection on the human person. However, this popular simplification may not do justice these first chapters of Genesis. Walter Brueggemann notes, “it is exceedingly difficult to liberate the narratives of Genesis 2-3 from the imposed themes of ‘original sin’ and ‘the Fall,’ even though few critical interpreters read the text in such a way.”¹⁵ In interpreting these chapters, it may be helpful to remember the term “the Fall” does not exist anywhere in the Bible in reference to these events, and references to the image of God or *imago dei* are few, and all in Genesis: Genesis 1:26-27, 5:1, and 9:6. Even in later writings from biblical times, direct references to the *imago dei* are rare: only Wisdom 2:23 and Ecclesiasticus 27:3 in the Apocrypha, and only I Corinthians 11:7 and James 3:9 in the

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Remember You Are Dust*, ed. K. C. Hanson (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012), 78.

New Testament.¹⁶ From the perspective of the Old Testament, it is Genesis 2 that may be the most foundational to theological anthropology (see below), and other themes in Genesis 1 and 3 may be just as important as the most famous ones, but often overlooked.

In the first creation story of Genesis, found in 1:1-2:4, the crowning event of creation is not the creation of humanity – not even humanity in the image of God – but the Sabbath. The Sabbath is the seventh day, the day of completion; the day of rest. The Sabbath recurs in the Old Testament as a commandment (Ex. 20:8-11 and Deut. 5:12-15), but the creation story makes clear that the Sabbath precedes and transcends the law. Also in this first creation story, even in the key verses of 1:26-7 quoted above, it is clear that the creation of humans “in the image of God” was done in the context of the whole creation. It can even be inferred that God’s “image” and “likeness” is present in humankind precisely in that they share God’s dominion over all other creatures. No understanding of the biblical understanding of humanity’s creation and purpose will be complete without understanding the relationship of humankind to the web of creation and to Sabbath completeness.

In Genesis 3, the more the story of the first people is distilled into a doctrinal principle of “the Fall,” the more of the nuance of the story is lost. Doctrine focuses attention on an act of disobedience as the key event, but such focus distracts from what is otherwise a very wise and richly-textured story. Before the acts of disobedient eating take place, there is an element of confusion and doubt, sowed by the serpent. There is also a desire to know all things, and to be like God (a tad ironic in light of Genesis 1:26-27).

¹⁶ Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982), 215-216. Anderson goes on to discuss several New Testament texts that may refer to the image of God: Acts 17:28, Rom. 8:29, II Cor. 3:18, Eph. 4:24, Col. 3:10, I Jn. 3:2, and Col. 1:15.

The question is left open as to whether the humans actually gained any knowledge or not – all we know for certain that changed is that “they knew that they were naked” (Gen. 3:7, NRSV). The key relationship that is disrupted is the one between the people and God, but what causes the disruption? The disobedience itself, or the shame of it? It seems to be the shame that actually causes the people to hide from God (Gen. 3:8, 10). Since this story is a *story* – a narrative – it invites a less propositional understanding of “the Fall.” Many relationships are broken or distorted. The narrative of Genesis 3 shows ruptured relationships between the two people as they blame each other (3:12), between the people and God as they disobey and hide in shame, and between the people and themselves, ashamed of their own bodily existence.

Genesis 1 and 3 have certainly been fruitful grounds for reflection for the Christian theological tradition, and they can be again for those who can read them with fresh eyes, but the more foundational text for the anthropology of the Old Testament may be Genesis chapter 2. In Genesis 2, humanity’s deep connection to all other creatures (Gen. 2:8-9, 18-20) is portrayed at least as strongly as in chapter 1, and there is an intimacy between the first human and God throughout this second creation that rivals anything that can be extrapolated from the *imago dei* in the first creation story. But the most important concepts from chapter 2 are the formation of the human being “from the dust of the ground” (Gen. 2:7, NRSV), and God’s observation – or pronouncement – that “it is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18, NRSV).

That human beings come from the very stuff of the earth has many implications. Though humanity may be ashamed of it (see Genesis 3), humans are creatures, too, and human destiny is tied to the earth itself and to the destiny of every other creature. That the

human formed from dust is animated by the breath or Spirit of God¹⁷ is not an invitation to a dualistic understanding of human life, but rather an acknowledgement of God as the giver of all life¹⁸ and the dependence of this now-living earthen vessel on God for all things. This is the picture of humanity that will dominate the whole Old Testament: needy creatures and frail, yet animated by the very Spirit of God and valued by their Creator. The dust and the breath are fully integrated to form humankind. This insight certainly nuances the statement at the end of chapter 3, usually heard entirely as curse and punishment: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19, NRSV). These words do contain judgment, but one part of it is not a curse but a plainly-stated fact: that humanity is dust. Even before the Fall, that was already true.¹⁹

“Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (Gen. 2:18, NRSV). God’s declaration here could be a profound starting point for all reflection on human community, but that would not be saying enough – Adam’s first companions are the animals that join him in the garden! Yet it is the presence of another human being that causes the man to say “this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23, NRSV). That sexuality, procreation, marriage, and family relationships would be among the basic structures of human community are “givens” for the Old Testament perspective, but God’s words in 2:18 are

¹⁷ The Hebrew *ruach* can just as easily be rendered Spirit, breath, or wind; the concreteness of breath seems to fit well with the concrete method of story-telling in this chapter.

¹⁸ This core belief that God gives life through the Holy Spirit survived into the witness of the early church in the Constantinopolitan Creed (popularly “Nicene”); see John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine From the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1982), 33.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, *Remember You Are Dust*, 78-79.

about more than just husbands and wives. It is just one of the first and clearest of innumerable Old Testament references to an understanding of humans as beings defined by their relationships: “‘Life’ means connectivity”²⁰ from the biblical perspective. Bernd Jankowski calls the biblical person “a ‘constellative’ being, integrated into a social community. The term ‘constellation’ gives expression to complex, mutually oriented relations of human existence (man/woman, individual/community, God/human being).”²¹ Matthias Krieg identifies four relational dimensions in biblical anthropology – vital (bodily health), personal (action and consequence), social, and transcendental – and it is connectivity in these dimensions that constitute fullness of life: “wholeness or increase of [any] one relational dimension means life... on the other hand, injury or decrease of [any] one relational dimensions means death.”²² Human integrity is socially constructed, and a theological anthropology underlies it all: “According to the Old Testament witness, it is ‘before God, in God’s presence’ (*coram Deo*), that human beings become human.”²³

The Old Testament as Diverse Treasury of Reflection

The outstanding feature of the Old Testament canon is the great variety of approaches, emphases, and perspectives regarding the human condition. Different genres, different authors and traditions, and different eras allow this diverse canon to encompass so much. Its diversity is one of its key characteristics, and is essential in understanding its manifold perspectives on anthropology; Wolff writes,

²⁰ Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, 51.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

²² Quoted in *ibid.*, 43.

²³ *Ibid.*, 12.

The Old Testament is not based on a unified doctrine of man, nor are we in a position to trace a development in the biblical image of man. The fact that every individual document presupposes a particular view of man could be a challenge to a systematic of biblical anthropology.²⁴

That the inclusion of divergent and potentially mutually-exclusive views was intentional in the gathering of the canon would be too much to assume, but clearly the various views and approaches to the human condition were tolerated and even valued. For the purposes of this thesis, only a brief summary is possible of what the Old Testament offers, touching on the dominant genre and an overview of some other broad themes.

The dominant genre of the Old Testament is narrative. It is not a given that a theological text would have to be presented in narrative form, but it has profound implications for theological anthropology. In narrative form, the disclosure of God – of God’s will and God’s character – comes through the lives and actions of human beings and through the history of peoples and the whole human race. The genre of narrative, whether the daily lives of individuals and families or sweeping histories of kingdoms and empires, necessarily links God’s revealed identity to human life. Narrative is not the ideal form for theology that is propositional in nature, but the preacher will note that it may be the ideal form for inviting the listener into personal engagement through empathetic identification with the characters in the story.²⁵

Again, the place to start in understanding the power of Old Testament narrative is Genesis. Even beyond its foundational first chapters, Genesis narratives offer

²⁴ Wolff and Kohl, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 3; *ibid.*

²⁵ For an excellent discussion of the dynamics of empathy choice in listeners to biblical narrative, see Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear?: Bridging the Gap between Pulpit and Pew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 29-64. .See chapter 3.

innumerable fruitful themes for reflection. Genesis chapters 4-11 depict the completion of the Fall in narrative form, as corrupt human nature becomes evident in jealousy, violence, wickedness, family strife, and the divisions of nations and peoples. Using a conglomeration of narratives of varying lengths, some tightly interrelated and others largely unrelated, these chapters catalogue the extent of the Fall, its effect on relationships, and its manifestations in all forms of human society.

Starting in Genesis 12, the narrative becomes simpler and more focused, following the lives of individuals. In five generations of Abraham's family, all manner of human situations unfold. Particularly notable in the Genesis stories of Abraham and Jacob is the introduction of the theme of God's unmerited favor and blessing bestowed on specific human beings. In these same stories of favor and blessing there is an important counter-theme in the clear flaws of those people chosen to be blessed. The Genesis theme of God's blessing on deeply flawed people is echoed later in the selection of Moses, the Judges, King David, and elsewhere.

All Old Testament narratives place human experience in a theological context, but not all are overtly theological, and not all share the same approach. The prevalent Deuteronomistic historical narrative, for instance, explicitly states the activities and judgments of God that incite human events and react to them. Yet several other narratives – such as the books of Ruth and Esther, and the Joseph cycle in Genesis 37-50 – bring the human experience to the forefront, and offer an inductive approach to theological anthropology, leaving God's role as something more to be pondered than explained.²⁶ While the first approach may offer more theological clarity, the second approach may be

²⁶ The translators of the Septuagint found Esther's lack of explicitly theological content so disturbing that they saw the need to add some!

more relatable for anyone who does not hear God's voice in quite the way that Abraham and Jacob did.

In narrative forms or in other genres, the Old Testament can see humanity manifested in the individual and in larger groups as a unit. The Torah addresses both specific people and society as a whole. Some passages focus on the obedience or disobedience of individuals, such as the narratives of the good kings and bad kings, or the sage advice of the book of Proverbs for individuals' life choices. Other passages reflect on the covenant community as a whole and its faithfulness or faithlessness. The prophets take this reflection to the level of social analysis and, like the chapters of Genesis that explore the implications of the Fall, shine a light on the systems and symptoms that implicate all individual participants in society in the sins of the whole.

If one book stands out in the Old Testament canon as a sustained, fully-engaged reflection on humanity *coram Deo*, it is the book of Psalms. The Psalms themselves are a microcosm of the diversity of the Old Testament, and, being in the form of prayers, offer theology from a human point of view, each prayer grounded in a different life experience across a broad spectrum. While narrative invites the empathetic identification of listeners or readers toward the characters in the story, the Psalms invite empathic involvement through their first-person subjectivity. The power of the Psalms, as Martin Luther writes, is the sense of recognition that comes from finding one's own place in them:

That they speak these words to God and with God, this, I repeat, is the best thing of all. This gives the words double earnestness and life. For when humans speak with humans about these matters, what they say does not come powerfully from the heart; it does not burn and live, is not so urgent. Hence it is that the Psalter is the book of all the saints; and everyone, in whatever situation they may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit their case, that suit them as if the words were put there just for their sake, so that they could not put it better themselves, or find or wish for anything better. This also serves another purpose. When these

words please a human and fit the case, that person becomes sure of being in the community of saints, and that it has gone with the all the saints as it goes with oneself, since they all sing with the self one little song.²⁷

John Calvin also hailed the Psalms as a source of human self-understanding: “I have been accustomed to call this book, not inappropriately, an anatomy of all the parts of the soul, for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not there represented as in a mirror.”²⁸

The power of the Psalms is not in their propositional summation of human experience, but in their specificity, and the extremity and variety of situations they express:

Psalms of lament and thanksgiving [portray] the life situations in which a human being in ancient Israel is... harassed, persecuted, ill, or dying, but also... saved, praising, or giving thanks. It is therefore not a matter of general characteristics of human nature or of ‘basic anthropological constants’ but rather of the unique experiences and behavior patterns that show the speakers of these psalms in existential conflict situations, which they seek to overcome through lament and prayer.²⁹

Psalms (and especially the most poignant of them) present human persons in situations of regression: when they are most vulnerable in hurt, most ecstatic in naïve joy, most sensitized to life, driven to the extremes of life and faith, when all the ‘covers’ of modern rationality or ancient convention have disappeared or become dysfunctional... the use of the Psalms in every age is for times when the most elemental and raw human issues are in play.³⁰

In the Psalms there is general applicability to human experience combined with enough specificity to evoke recognition of one’s own experience. Finding language is empowering:

²⁷ Luther’s “Preface to the Psalter,” quoted in Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, 342.

²⁸ Calvin’s preface to his commentary on the Psalms, quoted in *ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *From Whom No Secrets Are Hid: Introducing the Psalms*, ed. Brent A. Strawn (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 152.

The language of these poems does more than just help persons to embrace and recognize their real situation. In dramatic and dynamic ways, the songs can also function to evoke and form new realities that did not exist until, or apart from, the singing of the song.³¹

Essential to understanding the Psalms is the fact that this powerful first-person telling of the human experience is done in God's presence, and often addressed to God. Bernd Jankowski sees in the Psalms the "impossibility of objectification" of human beings:

Even in places where the nature of humanity is the object of consideration, such observant reflection occurs in astonished consternation rather than neutral description. The third-person speech – 'What are human beings?' – flows immediately into an address of God: 'that you remember them, or a single person that you care for that one?' According to the Old Testament understanding, it is only from the perspective of God that one can ask who or what human beings are.³²

Old Testament reflection on the human condition includes a deep probing of the meaning of human sin, but it is not limited to human sinfulness. Several texts, picking up from Genesis 1 and 2, continue to explore the enduring goodness inherent in humanity. While later theology will at times nearly equate humanity and sinfulness, the Psalms can proclaim, "You have made [human beings] a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet" (Psalm 8:5-6, NRSV), and, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14, NRSV). And this positive outlook is not limited to the Psalter; is it any wonder that many later periods, those with emphasis on the humanity's sinful nature, have had little use for the Song of Songs, with its celebrations of beauty, nature, and human love?

³¹ Ibid., 172.

³² Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, 13-14.

Underlying the reflection on both the goodness and the sinfulness of human beings is a foundational understanding of the fragility and vulnerability of humankind. The many narratives of famine and nomadic life, of war and foreign occupation, of childlessness and sickness, underscore the tenuousness of human existence and explore both the fear and the dependence that spring from vulnerability. Job reflects on the inexplicability of suffering so familiar to human life; Ecclesiastes reflects on life's randomness and seeming futility; Lamentations joins the lament Psalms in finding a place for sufferers *coram Deo*. In Genesis 3:19, in the context of curse and banishment, God reminds the people that "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (NRSV); in Psalm 103:14, in the context of praise, the people celebrate that God "knows how we were made; he remembers we are dust" (NRSV). Knowing that God does remember, they can expect compassion for their fragility and humble state.³³ Reflecting on the Genesis 2 creation story, Walter Brueggemann reflects on the seemingly opposite sins that arise from, on the one hand, denial of vulnerability and, on the other hand, anxiety about it, and about what our fragility might mean for our contribution in the world:

We imagine that we are *free* to take whatever we can get. We imagine that we are *required* to take whatever we can get, because there is no one to give us what we need. We imagine that fending off death, which we *can* do for ourselves and which we *must* do for ourselves, gives us rights of usurpation and privileges of confiscation from our brothers and sisters and from the creation all around us...we neglect our God-given fragility. We also lose track of our vocation. We are, as breathed on dust, called into the service and company of another... This creature, formed of dust, is entrusted with the garden, with all the animals, and with all living things. Our creatureliness binds us to the role of steward, friend, and companion of all other creatures who share our fragility (emphasis added)³⁴

³³ Brueggemann, *Remember You Are Dust*, 82-84.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

The New Testament and the Humanity of Christ

The New Testament may not have to offer the same variety of reflection seasoned by time as the Old, being shorter and written by fewer people over a much shorter period of time, but it does offer the biblical preacher an invaluable treasure: examples of Christian proclamation. Further, the work of the Apostles increasingly turned to the communication of faith across the lines of culture, from a Jewish cultural base to a growing variety of Gentile cultures. That work of translating the faith to culturally dissimilar groups may have brought into focus claims about what is universally human. Their work undoubtedly built on the foundation of the Old Testament – with different authors favoring different Old Testament sources, and particular circumstances calling for certain Old Testament resources – but reaching out to the Gentiles both called into question all assumptions and led to new ways of connecting based on common human experience.

The most important addition of the New Testament, however, must be the proclamation of Christ. That Christ is proclaimed *as* human necessitates a re-evaluation of what it means *to be* human. The proclamation of Christ offers new insights by both comparison and contrast: comparison, in that the question of what it means that Christ is human invites the question of what it means for all people to be human; and contrast in that it is the revelation of redeemed humanity that sheds the most light on fallen humanity, or in the terminology of Romans 5, it is the New Adam, Christ, who makes the starkest contrast to the Old Adam.

This comparison and contrast raises the question of continuity and discontinuity: in what sense is humanity (as it has existed previously) replaced by Christ, or one form of

humanity replaced by another in the call of discipleship, conversion, receiving the Holy Spirit, or baptism? Or, in what sense are the same human lives that have existed previously continued in the life of Christ, and the identity of human persons apart from connection to Christ continued when they are connected to Christ? This tension underlies much of what is written in the epistles. On the one hand, Paul can proclaim the radical truth that “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17, NRSV) and Peter can announce “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Pet. 2:9, NRSV). On the other hand, the content of these same letters makes it clear that these proclamations come in contrast to the ethical situation of people who are, frustratingly, showing signs of continuity with their old established selves and ways of being in the world, often including a penchant for returning to that darkness from which they came.

Several books bear mentioning for certain outstanding characteristics. The Gospel according to Mark stands out for its commitment to portraying the humanity of Jesus. As one of my parishioners has stated, Mark gives us Jesus “warts and all.” Several scenes show Jesus in very relatable human situations, often giving a very human response: temptation by Satan in the desert (1:13), confusion when he was touched by someone in the crowd and did not know who it was (5:30-32), frustration with his disciples and the people he encountered (e.g. 9:19), anger at his opponents and the abuses in the Temple (e.g. 11:15-16), distress in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:32-42), and the cry of anguish from the cross (15:34). While some of these passages have apparently embarrassed or

confused some interpreters,³⁵ I have found these passages to be favorites of many who find in them a relatable and sympathetic portrayal of Jesus. Only one such favorite “human” scene is missing in Mark: Jesus shedding tears at the death of his friend Lazarus in John 11:33-38.

Matthew and Luke, while omitting or downplaying some of Mark’s portrayals, do add narrative form to the temptation of Jesus (Matt. 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13) Both also add narratives of Jesus’ birth and early life (Matt 1-2, Luke 1-2). Both nativities, in their own way, give narrative form to the fragility and vulnerability of human life shared in by Jesus.

The Gospel according to John, often understood to have the highest Christology of the gospels, and indeed in the whole New Testament, also then must make some of the most extreme statements to affirm the humanity of Christ. Most prominent among these in the gospel itself and in later reflection upon it is John 1:14a: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (NRSV). While showing Jesus to be not just *from* God or *of* God, but actually *God* (1:1, 20:28), this verse and others like it provide some of the strongest counterarguments to the denigration of humanity’s fleshly existence found in some Greek and other philosophies and often inferred from New Testament writings.

Some passages in the New Testament, indeed, lend themselves to interpretations that denigrate human identity through the denigration of “the flesh,” or seem to suggest a dualism contrary to the witness of the Old Testament, particularly in the letters of Paul. In response, F. LeRon Shults writes:

³⁵ Including, it would seem, some of the other gospel writers: see e.g. the comparison of Mark 5:21-43 and Matthew 9:18-26.

Although Paul makes the distinction “paradigmatically in Rom. 8) between living according to the ‘flesh’ (*sarx*) and according to the ‘spirit’ (*pneuma*), this language does not necessarily imply substance dualism. The ‘spiritual’ person is one whose whole self is oriented to the Spirit; the ‘fleshly’ person is one whose whole self is oriented toward fulfilling the passion of worldly desire (cf. Rom. 8:16; I Cor. 12:10-11, 6:17). Overall, then, Scripture depicts the human person as a dynamic unity, which it considers from various perspectives using terms such as ‘soul,’ ‘body,’ and ‘mind.’ Distinguishing these dimensions of human relationality is important, but the Bible is concerned with the salvation of the whole person in community in relation to God.³⁶

John’s insistence that the Word came in the flesh (*sarx*, John 1:14, c.f. I Jn. 4:2 and II Jn. 7) is important for proper understanding of these passages, as well as examining Paul’s usage of the term elsewhere (e.g. Phil. 1:22-24, Gal. 2:20). Paul is much more positive in his use of the term ‘body’ (*soma*), and that term cannot be understood in the New Testament apart from Jesus’ words at the Last Supper, offering his body (*soma*) to the disciples (Mt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; I Cor. 11:24).

Contrarily to his reputation for denigrating human bodily existence, Paul is seen by E. Earle Ellis as perhaps the strongest New Testament voice for an integrated human person. In I Corinthians, particularly chapter 15, Paul offers the deepest reflection on the eschatological hope of the general resurrection of humankind:

It is because Paul regards the body as the person and the person as the physical body that he insists on the resurrection of the body, placing it at the parousia of Christ in which personal redemption is coupled to and is a part of the redemption-by-transfiguration of the whole physical cosmos.³⁷

So it is the humanity of Christ – his coming in the flesh – that gives clarity to what it means to be human, and it is the resurrection of Christ – a bodily resurrection – that gives shape to Christian eschatological hope.

³⁶ F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), 178.

³⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*

Before moving on to the examples of proclamation that make up much of the rest of the New Testament, one book deserves mention as a singular sustained reflection on Christology and Christ's relation to humanity: the Letter to the Hebrews. While the gospels allows us to draw narrative implications about human nature and the nature of Christ, Hebrews gives us direct, propositional language. The author of Hebrews does not yet venture into the systematic reflection of the early church, nor the anathematizing of certain teachings, but it does lay the groundwork for much of that later systematization: "The author of the epistle to the Hebrews... more than any other New Testament author, emphasizes the full deity (1:10) but also the full humanity of Jesus."³⁸ Perhaps most importantly for anthropology, Hebrews addresses the basic human problem of sin without equating sin and human identity:

Jesus is not ashamed to call [human beings] brothers and sisters...since therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that, through death he might destroy the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery to the fear of death... Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful high priest in the service of god, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered he is able to help those who are being tested (Heb. 2:11-18, NRSV).

In one passage, the human realities of both sin and mortality are addressed – even with some subtle insight connecting them, alluding to “slavery to the fear of death” – and answered by the saving action of Jesus. At the same time, Jesus is portrayed as becoming truly human, like us “in every respect.” Hebrews 4:15 adds clarity: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (NRSV). If Jesus was like other

³⁸ Oscar Cullmann, “Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead: The Witness of the New Testament,” in *Immortality and Resurrection: Death in the Western World: Two Conflicting Currents of Thought*, ed. Krister Stendahl (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 16.

human beings in every respect, yet without sin, then sin cannot be the defining reality of human identity.

The Correlation of the Gospel and the Human Condition in Scripture

In both the Old and New Testaments, the Scriptures do not just describe the human condition, they also narrate God's response. More, they do not just narrate God's response, but actually correlate that response to the human condition like the solution to a problem or the answer to a question. This pattern acknowledges the diversity and particularity of human experience; there is no "one size fits all" articulation or proclamation of the gospel, but rather a God who responds to real human dilemmas and needs. In several extended passages, Scripture takes on the characteristic of proclamation, directly describing God's actions and the situations they are responding to, often naming or analyzing the situation and directly speaking God's response. This Scriptural form of proclamation provides Christian preaching with its warrant, much of its substance, and its pattern.

With the possible exception of the discourses of Moses, the work of the prophets is the first extended example of proclamation or preaching in the biblical canon, and so it is the first place we see the intentional correlation of the Word of God to the human situation. The work of proclamation is described in the call of Jeremiah: "to uproot and tear down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (1:10, NRSV). Relying on his reading of the work of Walter Brueggemann, Peter Steinke helpfully summarizes the

proclamation of the prophets of the pre-exilic and exilic periods in response to the “three temptations”³⁹ facing the people:

Table 1: Dynamics of Proclamation in Pre-exilic and Exilic Prophets (Steinke)

<i>Temptation/Behavior</i>	<i>Prophet's Response</i>
denial (that exile is coming)	truth
despair (that exile has come)	hope
magical thinking (that somehow exile does not have to be endured)	process (a way <i>through</i> exile) ⁴⁰

In Reality, *Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks*, Walter Brueggemann describes a similar pattern:

Table 2: Analysis of Pre-exilic and Exilic Prophetic Responses (Brueggemann)

<i>Attitude toward the destruction of Jerusalem</i>	<i>Prophetic Response</i>
confidence in the ideology of chosenness (misplaced theological certitude)	assertion of critical reality
denial amid the crisis of failed ideology	voiced grief
despair when faced with reality	buoyant hope in God ⁴¹

³⁹ Peter L. Steinke, *A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope* (Herndon, Va: The Alban Institute, 2010), 37-41.

⁴⁰ The words “truth” and “process” are either my own summaries of Steinke’s conclusions, or came from his other works or lectures.

⁴¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2014), 1-2.

It is notable that the prophetic response is often akin to the “good news” that the New Testament will describe, but not always. Truth-telling in the face of denial or misplaced faith will not strike the listeners as “good news.” Yet, whether the prophets’ responses were heard as good news or not, they were antidotes to the spiritual sickness of the people, solutions to the presenting problem, or if not solutions, they provided the next step along the way to solution and healing. Walter Brueggemann makes the case that Christian proclamation was anticipated in the pattern of the prophet’s proclamation, and recapitulates the lived human experience of the people in the fall of Jerusalem, the exile, and the restoration. Though the content of the Christian message is new, the journey it points to is a familiar biblical journey of faith.

The pattern of correspondence takes its distinctly Christian form in the preaching of the Apostles. The book of Romans is one extended apostolic sermon, and its value to the biblical preacher is the correlation of diverse categories as Paul systematically moves through several ways of understanding the human predicament and showing how the gospel of Jesus Christ can be understood and experienced as a response to each of them. Romans chapters 5 through 8 are particularly instructive.⁴² There may be many ways of analyzing this extended passage, and the argument does not break down neatly by sub-passage, but here is one possible summary:

Table 3: The Gospel Correlated to the Human Situation in Romans 5-8

<i>Text</i>	<i>Human Situation</i>	<i>Correlated Gospel Response</i>
Rom. 5:1-5	suffering	hope; God’s love; the presence of

⁴² This way of looking at Romans 5-8 and much of the content arose from conversations and classwork with John Reumann.

		the Holy Spirit
Rom. 5:6-11	weak sinners, separated from God, under wrath	reconciliation (peace with God): reconciled by Christ's death, saved by his life
Rom. 5:12-21	all guilty of sin through one man's disobedience; sin's dominion in death	all obedient through Christ, the new Adam; free gift; grace's dominion in righteousness
Rom. 6:1-11	enslaved to death and sin	Baptism into Christ's death and resurrection; death to sin, newness of life
Rom. 6:12-23	enslaved to sin, to self, and to one's own desires; under law; wages of sin is death	obedience to God, free from sin and desire; under grace; free gift of God is eternal life
Rom. 7:1-6	captive to the law	dead to the law; enslaved to new life in the Spirit
Rom. 7:7-8:2	inner conflict, ineffective will, evil at work in what is good, actions do not match intentions	Christ's rescue; no condemnation; set free from the law of sin and death
Rom. 8:3-17	living in the flesh, mind set on the flesh	Christ in the flesh; life in the Spirit, mind set on the Spirit; the Spirit's indwelling; adoption
Rom. 8:18-39	experience of futility, weakness, suffering, and persecution	the Spirit's help; living by hope in God's promises; Christ intercedes;

		sharing Christ's victory.
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Many New Testament texts could be analyzed in much the same way, but a few things are noteworthy about this passage. First, with these different articulations of both the human situation and the gospel in rapid succession, it becomes clear that Paul saw no problem with working from different anthropological assumptions and no contradiction in different articulations of the gospel. Second, we can begin to see the creative dynamic by which he correlated his proclamation to the presenting anthropology, sometimes using parallel formulations, such as answering the disobedience of the Old Adam with the obedience of the New Adam, but sometimes using deliberately contrasting formulations, such as answering death as the wages of sin, not with some form of wage of righteousness, but with the free gift of eternal life. Third, he can see things that are good in themselves, such as the law and his own good intentions, and not just bad things as part of the complexity of the human predicament. Fourth, we can see that while Paul speaks of the human condition in morally negative terms, such as sin, disobedience, ineffectiveness, and self-indulgence, he is equally comfortable speaking of the human condition in terms that are morally ambiguous or neutral, such as suffering, weakness, confusion, and the experience of futility or persecution. Whether or not the situation is humanity's fault, the gospel has an answer. Whether the problem is moral evil, societal evil, or natural evil, God responds with a solution. Notably, while all of these chapters are beloved by many Christians, it is perhaps the first and last passages, where Paul offers God's redeeming response in the face of suffering, that are most beloved.

As the church began its work of preaching, responding to both timeless and current aspects of the human condition with the gospel message, it had not just the materials for its proclamation available in the Scripture, but a developed pattern of correlation for imitation and adaptation.

Theological Developments

Biblical Anthropology in the Early Church

In the early centuries of the church, the canon of the New Testament was collected and acknowledged, the creeds were written, and councils held to resolve disagreements, while all the while Christian witness and preaching continued and evolved. Perhaps most important for Christian anthropology is no single articulation of anthropology was applied to the canonization process, and anthropology was not a major theme of any creed or council; “discussion of the *imago dei* did not seem to touch the nerve of theological orthodoxy in the same way that concepts of the person of Christ did.”⁴³ To the extent that the early church dealt with the issue, it followed the pattern of the New Testament and dealt with it primarily in the context of, and secondarily to, Christology and soteriology. Some positions were condemned as heretical, but a variety of approaches to theological anthropology, many of them biblically informed, were allowed to co-exist and to be put to use in Christian life and preaching.

J. Patout Burns summarizes the common themes and points of divergence:

[The Church Fathers] share the conviction that humanity’s present condition does not correspond to God’s ultimate purpose and original intention in its creation. Common to all as well is the assurance that human being are themselves responsible for this disparity. They also demonstrate that the human capacity for

⁴³ Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology*, 220-221.

failure was either inevitable or the necessary consequence of the perfection God intended humanity to attain. Finally, all firmly believe that, in Christ, God reverses the consequences of the Fall and moves human beings to a beatitude from which they will not again fall. Although they agree in all of these assumptions and assertions, [the Fathers] differ significantly in explaining the initial state and vocation of humanity, in estimating the damage done in the Fall, and in describing the resources for recovery provided in Christ.⁴⁴

For today's preacher, the variety of the earliest Christian writings on anthropology is their strength in providing sources for fresh approaches. Since some approaches later became dominant and increasingly rigid, they can come between the preacher and the text as a filter or as blinders. Those early preachers who took the biblical witness seriously but whose approach became a minority or dissenting voice can help us see nuances in the text and options for preaching that our current commitments prevent us from seeing. At the same time, returning to the writings of those who helped form the dominant traditions can help us to see the initial motivations for doctrines that have come to appear out-dated and ossified, and reclaim the evangelical and biblical heart of the tradition.

Ireneus set the tone for orthodoxy, arguing against opponents on either side of the spectrum; "he rejected both the denigration of the flesh and the absolution of humanity of responsibility for the problems of its actual condition."⁴⁵ Within those parameters, two schools of thought emerged in the next centuries.

The first strain of thought came through the ascetics, including many of the early monastics, for whom "the Christian life can be described as a struggle to serve God in a hostile environment."⁴⁶ They had a low view of human society and taught Christians to

⁴⁴ J. Patout Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, Sources of Early Christian Thought, edited by William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 4.

isolate themselves from the corruption around them, but conversely maintained a high view of what was possible for a Christian in solitude, believing that human beings really had at least most of what it took to make commitments and obey God.⁴⁷ The good news of Christ, then, came in the form of his supreme example, and in the encouragement that came from seeing the rewards of obedience in his resurrection.⁴⁸

The second strain of thought was Christian Platonism, including that of Justin Martyr, Origen, and Ambrose, which tried to bring the resources of non-Christian philosophy to bear on anthropology, leading to the early strengthening of the soul/body dualism. The Platonists concerns were for the object of a person's will or desire, and the proper mastery of the soul or spirit over the body, thus they understood the Fall as "the human spirit [turning] away from God to itself," and losing "its dominion over the desires of the flesh... Thus the proper order within the human person [of spirit over flesh] was reversed."⁴⁹ God's action, then, is self-revelation in Christ, which "arouses the desire for God" and begins "a steady growth into union with God."⁵⁰ Importantly, the Christian life is not an attempt to gain a reward, but the growing in desire for and knowledge of God is its own reward: "The more a person knows and loves God, the more [she or] he hungers for God."⁵¹

Before moving on to Augustine, several aspects of these early anthropologies are worth noting. Though they are inconsistent with post-Augustinian soteriological models,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 6-8.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 8-9.

⁵¹ Ibid., 9.

both have continued to be preached regularly, even in the most Augustinian traditions of the West. Again, though they fall short of Augustinian standards for theological anthropology, they are in many ways biblical, in that there are many biblical texts that could, taken in isolation, support either one of them.

Augustine became, for the Western church, the heir of both the ascetical and the Platonist traditions, and from that basis in tradition began a revolution in theological anthropology. Though he was trained in Platonist philosophy and came to faith through the preaching of Ambrose, Augustine's upbringing and later call to serve in North Africa "brought him under the influence of a popular form of the ascetical tradition which assumed a greater unity between body and soul [than the Platonists]." ⁵² His interpreters can trace through the course of his writings "changes in Augustine's views as he became increasingly convinced that 'Platonic' views are not compatible with serious exegesis of God's word in Scripture," especially regarding the dualism of body and soul. ⁵³ Over time, he began to speak of the human being as a "mixture" of body and soul, and by AD 411, in his reflections on the incarnation, he "introduces, for the first time, a new terminology for the body-soul relationship. The 'mixture' is now, mysteriously, a *persona* [the Latin equivalent for 'person']... The word *persona* seems expressly chosen to indicate a union of substances." ⁵⁴ From that point, he continues to use the language of *persona*, calling it

⁵² Ibid., 12.

⁵³ John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 95. See also 161.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 100.

in *The City of God* a “miraculous combination,”⁵⁵ and in about that same period writes, “anyone who wants to separate the body from human nature is a fool.”⁵⁶

Drawing on the best of both previous traditions and his own pastoral work and engagement with the Bible, Augustine gave the strongest articulation to several points: that participation in the church was necessary for salvation, that there is not innate morality or desire for God in humankind apart from God’s action, that all humans are born sinful, inheriting the guilt of the Fall, and that, once fallen, the mind and will are distorted such that they can no longer judge and act rightly.⁵⁷ Much of this was written in reaction and response to other voices of his time who became his opponents, such as the Manicheans and the Donatists. The most important controversy regarding the human condition was his with the Christian monk Pelagius, who took the ascetical view to its extreme conclusion regarding humanity’s innate goodness, human’s capacity to choose God, to choose the good, and to reach perfection. In response, Augustine tried to affirm the goodness of humanity’s creation and the *imago Dei*, while also making clear the deep need for salvation in Christ. It was that desire to clarify the human person’s need for God’s saving intervention that drove Augustine to speak about humanity’s deep sinfulness, weakness, and inability of themselves to cooperate with God or choose the good:

Human nature was certainly originally created blameless and without any fault (*vitium*); but the human nature by which each one of us is now born of Adam requires a physician, because it is not healthy. All good things, which it has by its conception, life, senses, and mind, it has from God, its creator and maker. But the

⁵⁵ Ibid., 101.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 111.

⁵⁷ Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, 13-19.

weakness which darkens and disables these good natural qualities, as a result of which that nature needs enlightenment and healing, did not come from the blameless maker but from original sin (*ex originali peccato*), which was committed by free will (*liberum arbitrium*). For this reason our guilty nature is liable to a just penalty. For if we are now a new creature in Christ, we were still children of wrath by nature, like everyone else [quoting Ephesians 2:3].⁵⁸

In clarifying his position, Augustine gave increasing weight to the terms “original sin” and “free will,” but all of this was to keep foremost in the discussion God’s grace – God’s free and independent initiative in the salvation of humanity. By bringing into focus human weakness and the condition of being “fallen,” he could likewise bring into focus the necessity and the magnitude of what Christ accomplished. He could also take seriously biblical language by no longer speaking of a gradual journey from one degree of perfection to another, but rather of a radical shift like passing from death to life (Romans 6), speaking of those who are now in Christ as a new creation (II Cor. 5:17), as those who once “were not a people, but now... are God’s people” (I Pet. 2:10, NRSV). In defining and delineating the character of fallen humanity, he could more clearly see the character of redeemed humanity.

Augustine’s influence on Christian theological anthropology, especially in the Latin-speaking West and the churches associated with Rome, can hardly be overstated. On the one hand, Augustine almost completely subsumed church teaching on anthropology, at least in its current fallen state, into the category of sin: to be human is to be fallen and guilty. On the other hand, Augustine finally took seriously humanity’s deep need for salvation, both as he read it in the Scriptures and as he experienced it in himself and the world around him, and placed the emphasis on God’s action to save through Jesus

⁵⁸ Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 398.

Christ – not to provide an example, not to demonstrate a reward, not to entice humanity to a better way, but to save a people who cannot save themselves.

Contemporaneous to these developments in anthropological thinking were two other streams in the life of the early church that put the accents elsewhere in the human experience: the preaching of the early church and the work of the ecumenical councils.

Regarding preaching, what we have from the early church reveals a surprising variety of atonement theories – by turns odd and delightful – being utilized.⁵⁹ This variety allowed for some creativity, it seems, in correlating the saving work of Christ to the situations arising from both anthropological philosophy and from human experience itself.

An illustration of the diversity of interpretations and understandings accepted across a wide range of churches can be found in the various portrayals of the meaning of salvation that have come down to us from early Christian communities...The one [Jesus Christ] who was depicted on the walls of a church in Dura-Europos as the shepherd, and by Justin Martyr in Rome as the teacher of true philosophy, in North Africa was depicted [by Tertullian] as also being the Lamb who was sacrificed to provide satisfaction for sin. All three of them were biblical images, and all offered a way of interpreting the New Testament story in ways that made sense to believers. The different focus of each reflected in part differences in cultural and social contexts (the house transformed into a public church building in Dura-Europos, the philosopher's teaching hall in Rome, the priest's sacrificial altar in Carthage).⁶⁰

Most foundationally, the preaching of the early church had to come to terms with the anthropological implications of resurrection. What had been hinted at and alluded to in the Old Testament became the very heart of Christian proclamation with the resurrection of Jesus. Oscar Cullman sees the early church's proclamation of resurrection

⁵⁹ For examples such as the "'ransom' theory," "'recapitulation in Christ," the "'mousetrap' theory," the harrowing of Hell, etc., see *ibid.*, 328-338.

⁶⁰ Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement Vol 1 Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 54-55.

– as opposed to the Greek philosophical notion of immortality – as rooted in Old Testament thought:

If we want to understand the Christian faith in the resurrection, we must completely disregard the Greek thought that the material, the bodily, the corporeal is bad and *must* be destroyed, so that the death of the body would not be in any sense a destruction of the true life. For Christian (and Jewish) thinking, the death of the body is also destruction of God-created life. (emphasis original)⁶¹

Thus the understanding of Jesus' bodily return from death is an affirmation of the first chapter of Genesis' claim that the created world is "very good" (1:31, NRSV) and the second chapter's understanding that bodily human life comes from God and so is holy (2:7). "Therefore it is death and not the body which must be conquered in resurrection."⁶²

Cullmann goes on to explain that in early Christian preaching, death was evil because it was related to sin, but also, apart from sin, death was evil in itself:

The belief in the resurrection presupposes the Jewish connection between death and *sin*. Death is not something natural, willed by God, as in the thought of the Greek philosophers; it is rather something unnatural, abnormal, opposed to God... this is the view of death held by the whole of primitive Christianity. Just as sin is something opposed to God, so is its consequence, death... Nevertheless, death *as such* is the enemy of God. For God is life, and the creator of life. (emphasis original)⁶³

In reading early Christian sources, and indeed already in the New Testament, one can see both the appropriation of Greek ideas of immortality used to speak of the eternal life of Jesus and all believers and this radical proclamation of bodily resurrection rooted in the foundational anthropology of the Old Testament – often in various combinations within the same sermon or document.

⁶¹ Cullmann, "Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead: The Witness of the New Testament," 19.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 20-21.

While the anthropological leanings of the early church's preaching must be reconstructed by inferences from surviving documents, in the year AD 325 the church began a very public and well-recorded work: the ecumenical councils, and the creeds and canons they produced. While by no means unrelated to the philosophical thinking about humanity that was current, and certainly not unrelated to the practical work of preaching, the councils and creeds placed their emphases differently in important ways.

In the early councils, the focus of the discussion (and controversy) was on the Trinity. While not an overtly anthropological concern, these discussions did touch on matters that relate to the situation of humanity, both in considering what it means to be a person,⁶⁴ and in thinking of identity as fundamentally relational – understanding human relational identity to be in the likeness of the Trinity's *perichoretic* mutual in-dwelling, no doubt influenced by Genesis 1:26-27.

Over time, the focus of the councils moved from Trinitarian controversies to Christological ones, and it is in the matter of Christology that anthropology became directly involved, although still keeping the issue of the general human condition secondary to establishing the meaning of the humanity of Christ. The Arian controversy, beginning in AD 318, began in part because of a misunderstanding of the basic unity of the human person; the Arian party assumed that the "Logos incarnate is to be understood on the analogy of soul embodied: that Jesus is simply divine Logos together with a body

⁶⁴ "Person" has tended to be used in Trinitarian formulations in English, following the Latin, *persona*. *Persona* had already been used in Latin by Tertullian and later by Augustine to speak of the union of the two natures of Christ, and so by the time of the Fourth Ecumenical Council it became the preferred translation for the Greek *hypostasis*, even though it is more equivalent to the Greek *prosopon*. *Hypostasis* is notoriously difficult to translate.

and hence that no human soul is involved in his constitution.”⁶⁵ Because they saw soul and body as separable, they misunderstood both the union of God and human and the truly complete human nature present in Christ.

Further controversies, the greatest surrounding the teachings of Nestorius, went on for more than a century, necessitating an ecumenical council dedicated to Christological doctrine, the Fourth, convened in AD 451 at Chalcedon. The “Definition” put forward by that council has been accepted as Christological orthodoxy, but somewhat indirectly it gives shape to orthodox anthropology:

We confess one and the same Son, who is our Lord Jesus Christ, and we all agree in teaching that this very same Son is complete in his deity and complete – the very same – in his humanity, truly God and truly a human being, this very same one being composed of a rational soul and a body, coessential with the Father as to his deity and coessential with us – the very same one – as to his humanity, being like us in every respect apart from sin. As to his deity, he was born from the Father before the ages, but as to his humanity, the very same one was born in the last days from the Virgin Mary [the *theotokos*, or ‘God-bearer’] for our sake and the sake of our salvation: one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only Begotten, acknowledged to be unconfusedly, unalterably, undividedly, inseparably in two natures.⁶⁶

While it is important that this “Definition of Chalcedon” acknowledges that a human being is a unity of “a rational soul and a body,” even more importantly it acknowledges that Christ is “like us in every respect apart from sin.” While early in the Fifth Century Augustine could nearly equate human nature after the fall with corruption and sin, at mid-century this council could see that there is much, even most or almost all, of what it means to be human for Christ to share with us while still not sharing in sin. While not strictly contradictory, these ideas provide two distinct foci for Christian

⁶⁵ Richard A. Norris, *The Christological Controversy*, Sources of Early Christian Thought, edited by William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 19.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 159.

reflection on anthropology, Augustine's being most concerned with soteriology, and the Council's primarily reflecting on Christology.

Another conciliar action can be seen as bringing to completion this first important stage of the church's wrestling with the human situation. Importantly, this council, the Synod of Orange of 529, was not an ecumenical council, so its effect was only felt in the Western church. This gathering of church teachers produced a document that, in effect, summarized Augustine's teachings, in some cases moderating and in other cases systematizing them for pastoral use. It is interesting to note that, yet again, these church fathers found at the heart of the teaching of their Pelagian opponents a misunderstanding of the basic unity of the human person:

If anyone says that the whole person, that is, in both body and soul, was not changed for the worse through the offense of Adam's transgression, but that only the body became subject to corruption with the liberty of the soul remaining unharmed, then he has been deceived by Pelagius' error and opposes the Scriptures... If anyone asserts that... the damage [of Adam's transgression] is *only by the death of the body* which is a punishment for sin, and thus does not confess that *the sin itself which is the death of the soul* also passed through the one person into the whole human race, then he does injustice to God, contradicting the Apostle [Paul]. (emphasis added)⁶⁷

The council emphasized grace at every point, even more than it emphasized the fallenness of humanity which necessitated that grace. All desire for God, all rejection of sin, all humility and repentance, the desire for the sacraments as well as the sacraments themselves, and even faith itself originate with God and come through grace. Any good works of human beings arise from faith, and faith is a gift of God. "No one should any longer remain uncertain that faith itself comes to us from grace."⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, 113.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

After the Synod of Orange, there were few developments in biblical Christian anthropology for almost a thousand years. Orthodoxy had been established, and for the most part that orthodoxy was simply systematized, formalized, and restated, although in some cases it certainly was ossified, distorted, or even forgotten. The ascetic, Platonic, and Augustinian strains of thought (and to some extent the Pelagian as well) continued in various combinations across the Eastern and Western divisions of the church. New philosophical underpinnings found their way into Christian anthropology, with Aristotelian forms in time largely replacing the earlier reliance on Platonic ones, but very little new *biblical* anthropological reflection was brought to bear until the Reformation period.

Reformation Preaching and the Human Condition

The Reformation movement of the 16th Century can be understood as a new insistence on *biblical* anthropology, after a long period of reliance on extra-biblical sources and reflection.⁶⁹ The primary leaders of the Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin, are much better known for their insistence on the clarity and centrality of the doctrine of justification, but the doctrine of justification rests on a foundational understanding of the human condition.

Anthropology, and especially theological anthropology, gained a new prominence during the Reformation period:

John Calvin organized the first chapters of his 1559 *Institutes of the Christian Religion* around three claims. First, he insisted that ‘without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God.’ Second, ‘without knowledge of God there is no

⁶⁹ Lischer, “Luther and Contemporary Preaching: Narrative and Anthropology,” 493-494.

knowledge of self.’ Third, this mutuality between knowing God and knowing ourselves occurs in the experience of facing ‘God’s majesty.’⁷⁰

Theological anthropology is equally prominent in the Lutherans’ *Augsburg Confession*.⁷¹ In these reform movements, one can clearly see a return to the anthropology of Augustine and the Synod of Orange, but not in an unreflectively dogmatic way; the Reformers returned to Augustinian doctrines because they were troubled by the same pastoral questions and re-engaged with the same scriptural ideas that gave rise to those doctrines a millennia earlier. Luther was an Old Testament scholar, and with Calvin, was particularly taken with the Psalms.⁷² Like Augustine before them, Luther and Calvin were students of the Apostle Paul and his doctrine of justification as a key to understanding the rest of Scripture. Also rooted in the stories of Genesis, they may have surpassed Augustine by tying the *imago Dei* more closely to Christology. They saw “the *imago* as a relational reality established through ‘being in Christ.’”⁷³ Further, these founders of the two major reform movements joined Augustine in being skeptical of common assumptions about free will. The latter part of Romans 7 was pivotal to both in their understandings of the effect of the Fall on the human will.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality*, 1.

⁷¹ Immediately following the first article, “Concerning God,” comes a second on fallen and sinful humanity. Kolb, Wengert, and Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 36-38.

⁷² “[In the Psalms] you have a fine, bright, pure mirror that will show you what Christendom is. Indeed, you will find in it also yourself and the true *Gnothi seauton* [knowledge of self], as well as God himself and all his creatures,” Luther, quoted in Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, 342. See also Luther’s and Calvin’s words on the Psalms above in the section “The Bible as Source: The Old Testament as Diverse Treasury of Reflection.”

⁷³ Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology*, 220.

⁷⁴ David J. Lose, “Luther & Calvin on Preaching to the Human Condition,” *Lutheran Quarterly* (1996): 289, 291.

They also shared a rejection of the anthropology that then dominated the church, the “philosophical speculations of scholastic theology.”⁷⁵ Richard Lischer writes that Luther could make use of various ideas and philosophical propositions at various times in his preaching, precisely because he did not depend on any of them: “Toward the philosophical formulas he was creative, free – and indifferent.”⁷⁶ Social, historical, and psychological concerns, however they were expressed, were secondary to a person’s standing before God. Other than turning the church again to the Bible as source, the greatest reform made to anthropology was to insist, again, that true anthropology is *theological* anthropology.

Luther and Calvin had much in common in their re-appropriation of historic biblical and ecclesiastical teaching on the nature and state of humanity. David Lose catalogues their points of agreement:

First, they agreed on the nature of the unregenerate or carnal person. Calvin and Luther both assert the absolute inability of the human to merit or earn God’s grace, forgiveness or redemption... stand[ing] solidly against any hint of the synergism of which they charged their scholastic opponents... The second level of agreement rests in their mutual affirmation that God accounts the believer righteous for Christ’s sake alone... Third, they each affirm a common definition of faith, as the believer, seized by the Word, trusts in Christ for his or her salvation and, on account of this trust, is regarded by God as righteous... Finally, Luther and Calvin agree in their conviction that the law is utterly unable to achieve righteousness but can only reveal sin and destroy the pride of self-justification.⁷⁷

The effect of this agreement leads to similar developments in both movements. One similarity is to differentiate between the sinful, fallen person (or the person-as-sinner) and the redeemed or justified person (or the person-as-justified). The second

⁷⁵ Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology*, 220.

⁷⁶ Lischer, “Luther and Contemporary Preaching: Narrative and Anthropology,” 499.

⁷⁷ Lose, “Luther & Calvin on Preaching to the Human Condition,” 283-284.

similarity is to understand the Word of God also as differentiated, as both law and gospel. While these terms begin to part ways in the two Reformation traditions, they begin with common definitions, the gospel as a declaration of justification through Jesus Christ capable of creating saving faith, and the law as a word of devastating truth about the pervasiveness of sin and the inevitability of death, capable of cutting through any defensiveness and self-reliance and thus paving the way for the gospel message.

Just as we have seen throughout the development of biblical doctrine, sin and human nature have been closely associated yet not identical. Now the category of the Word of God as law joins this constellation of ideas with a related yet distinct role to play: the law addresses first (and in Lutheran understanding, only – more on this below) the fallen, sinful person. Law addresses the sin in the person-as-sinner. The Reformation heritage of law and gospel preaching, however, does not limit reflection on anthropology to the work of the law on the fallen person; the redeemed, holy, and justified person called into being through the Gospel must also be considered. The person-as-justified is also fully human and a potential focus of reflection on the human situation – in this case, the situation of redemption and life in the kingdom of God. The person-as-justified is in some sense more fully human, reflecting the *imago Dei* by being joined to the human-and-divine Christ and through Christ with God and all creation.

Where Luther and Calvin part ways most significantly is in regard to the human condition:

Both Reformers... understand justification in remarkably similar terms; the difference rests in their understanding of the justified. Hence, the central question is one of anthropology. Whereas Calvin perceives a continuity between the unregenerate and regenerate person, Luther does not.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Ibid., 290.

Put another way, while the two strains of thought agree on the condition of a person before receiving saving faith, they differ about what happens next when that person is brought to faith. For Calvin, the person moves from the category of sinner to the category of justified, and then progresses in the life of faith, slowly and incompletely leaving behind old sinful ways. Luther, instead, sees the continuation of the dead-end life of the person-as-sinner, while at the same time, a person-as-justified (a saint) is called into being by God's gospel address and becomes real through faith. Where Calvin sees two groups of humans, the fallen and the redeemed, Luther sees all humans as fallen – and some who are, simultaneously, redeemed.

The role of preaching is to respond to these realities with the Word of God. After a similar beginning, the response takes different forms in the two traditions. For Calvin, the law drives the sinner to the gospel, which transforms them. Thereafter, the law and gospel work in tandem, revealing the will of God. For Luther also the law drives the sinner to the gospel, and the gospel transforms, but the transformation is actually a new person called to life. Thereafter, the person-as-sinner persists and is addressed by the Law, driven again and again into death, while the person-as-justified also persists, again and again called to life in the gospel.

From a Lutheran perspective, there are several theological problems with the Calvinist understanding. First, while both theological formulations are susceptible to soul/body dualism, equating law and life in the flesh with the body, and gospel and life in the Spirit with the soul, Luther's formulation more clearly presents a body/soul unity that is lost in sin and dying and a body/soul unity that is raised up to eternal life. Calvin's formulation, having to account for the continuing sinful tendencies of believers, tends to

speak in terms of “the remains of the flesh,” “the remnant of the flesh,” the burden that weights down the spiritual person,⁷⁹ and similar words that can easily imply that the body is the redeemed Christian’s lingering problem. A second related problem is a minimization of the sinful potential of the redeemed person; unlike Luther, who sees the redeemed as still, simultaneously, fully sinful and dangerous like anyone else, Calvin sees a reformed person who merely reverts to old habits. Third, Calvin left the door open for later Calvinists to equate the law with the Old Testament and the gospel with the New (a habit, admittedly, not unknown among Lutherans). Fourth, as a result of the differing anthropology, there is a difference in how the law is preached to the justified: instead of continuing to condemn the persons-as-sinners in the pews and drive them to Christ as Luther would advocate, the Calvinist preacher holds up the law as a model of God’s will for the behavior of justified persons. “In Calvin’s analysis, the law remains the constant servant of the Lord; it is the human condition which changes, now allowing the believer to make proper use of this divine gift and tool.”⁸⁰

Luther’s problems are in many ways the inverse of Calvin’s. Where Calvin can see people who are restored to essential goodness, Luther still sees, at best, people with a jumble of impulses to good and evil. Where Calvin can draw a clear trajectory through life for the Christian, Luther sees two trajectories in the same person. Where Calvin can show a clear continuity between the sinner and the saint she or he becomes, Luther sees a sinner who remains a sinner and saint who appears on the scene in paradoxical simultaneity. The most difficult problem for preaching Luther’s version of this theology

⁷⁹ Ibid., 287-289.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 289.

is the question of how to account for the continuity of the person who is both sinner and saint. If there is not a linear continuity through time, as Calvin would suggest, then in what sense are the person-as-sinner and the person-as-justified in fact *the same person* who can be addressed by a preacher?

In Richard Lischer's analysis of Luther's own preaching, he sees the continuity of the person addressed through narrative. Theologically, Luther's anthropology was rather complex; in preaching, Luther's anthropology was practical, describing the complexity of life as sinner and saint in terms of story. In his writing, Luther had disdain for the telling of stories in preaching,⁸¹ probably reacting to abuses he has seen in which story served only to create interest and did not serve the proclamation, but Luther's own preaching shows that he in fact had great fondness for stories, and a gift for using them in preaching. Luther tended to use stories, first of all, to bring to life the story of Jesus, retelling and embellishing the story

in order that the hearer or reader may be touched in a way that bears direct relation to his or her own experience in life, that is, via a kind of participation that is not possible through elaborate and rigidly tiered sermon structures, which falsify both the gospel and the human consciousness that receives it.⁸²

In this way, Luther's use of narrative anthropology bears similarity to the way he speaks of the gospel coming to us in word and sacrament, external things through which God works to create internal realities.⁸³ Luther's work in translating Scripture, in studying the lives and the language of the people, and his pastoral work also found application in his preaching: "to anyone engaged in both theological reflection and parish

⁸¹ Lischer, "Luther and Contemporary Preaching: Narrative and Anthropology," 489-490.

⁸² Ibid., 490-491.

⁸³ E.g. Kolb, Wengert, and Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 460.

affairs as Luther was, the work of proving doctrine by life and illuminating life by doctrine involves a circular process.”⁸⁴ “Memory and faith permit the kind of narrative preaching in which the sacred story of God’s mercy and the not-so-sacred jumble of contemporary events are understood in terms of one another.”⁸⁵ Luther’s abstraction in his theological writings is balanced in his preaching, where

he reads the Bible and interprets human life realistically... Whereas Paul focuses on the objective situation of human pride and helplessness before the law, but does not offer the details of such bondage, Luther’s keen eye captures the psychological manifestations of alienation from God.⁸⁶

Paralleling the incarnation itself, pure doctrine must be, in preaching, cast in human form:

Luther’s preaching provides the clinical setting for his *simul justus et peccator* doctrine. He does not use narration as a gimmick for making religion ‘more real’ and therefore more palatable. His use of narration and its attendant attention to realistic detail is most appropriate because God really did become a man, and the members of Luther’s congregation – not just humanity – really are wholly righteous in Christ and at the same time wholly plunged into their own sin and this ‘big whorehouse’ of a world.⁸⁷

The solution to the problem of personal continuity in Luther’s theology, then, in large part, is the act of preaching itself: addressing in concrete terms the lived reality of being sinner-yet-justified. “His preaching was not only a vehicle for his theology... it *was* his theology at work”⁸⁸ (emphasis original). Like the narrative theology of the Old

⁸⁴ Lischer, “Luther and Contemporary Preaching: Narrative and Anthropology,” 491-493.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 497.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 493.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 492.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 501.

Testament and the Gospels, human beings experience theological truth as a story being lived:

The narrative style by no means dominates Luther's preaching. All his sermons presuppose the fiat deed of God in Jesus Christ. But in his sermons... Luther develops the human side of that gracious act by following the narrative to its (theo)logical conclusion or by pressing it to yield the comfort he wishes to impart. In doing so, he elongates the point of intersection between God and humanity and portrays the gospel as a transaction that occurs over time in the lives of God's people.⁸⁹

The problems presented by Luther's *theology* are tempered by attention to Luther's *practice*, a practice of correlating concrete expressions of the gospel with concrete presentations of the human predicament:

His use of narrative led him to unexpectedly human, concrete, and novel expressions of the gospel. The technique is simple. The narrative itself gives form to the human situation and points to a dilemma. Through a retelling and embellishing of the story Luther allows the gospel, the answer, to emerge from the narrative. The final shape of the gospel follows the contour of the problem. The resolution is not pronounced but arrived at.⁹⁰

Finally, the simultaneity of sinner and saint for Luther is not an anthropological puzzle to be solved, but an anthropological result of the impinging reality of the kingdom of God.⁹¹ "Luther's preaching presupposes not only realistic and empirical points of contact with Christian doctrine; it also presupposes the contemporary audience's participation in the divine story."⁹² There is a profound tension in human experience, but that is not simply human nature – it is the result of the eschatological pressure of Christ's arrival in this world and the coming of the *telos* of all things. A preacher, then, will do

⁸⁹ Ibid., 496.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 494.

⁹¹ Ibid., 504.

⁹² Ibid., 496.

better not to puzzle out the implications of the *simul*, but instead flesh out the lived reality of it and allow the dynamism of this tension to create the urgency in listeners the eschatological reality requires.

The Reformation tradition touches on the human condition at one more point of importance: the teaching of vocation, that all human beings have callings from God in the everyday world. The Reformers taught that it is God's intention that we engage fully in work, family, and community life, and that the functions we serve within these structures are, in fact, our service to God as we, in this way, love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:39, Mark 12:31, Rom. 13:9, Gal. 5:14). This was a "recovery of a theology of creation that affirmed finitude, domestic life, and [secular] pursuits when undertaken *coram Deo*."⁹³ Rather than a simple "table of duties," then, vocation becomes a picture of redemption: in the roles Adam and Eve were created for, God's limited yet beloved creatures go about serving creation and one another, not rebelling against God or denying their own vulnerability and finitude, but in a dependent and trusting relationship with God.

⁹³ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2014), 106.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reviewing the literature on the task of correlating the gospel to the human condition has already begun and is by this point well along: the Bible is the source for this task, and many of the methods arise from the Bible itself and from the church's theology and preaching through the centuries. What remains is to engage with the modern context and the latest interpreters of this long tradition, and to examine what faithfulness and effectiveness look like in our time.

In Dialogue with Post-Enlightenment Anthropology

The sea change that occurred after the Reformation did not come from within the church, but it has changed the context of preaching and thus also must shape the church's proclamation. That change was the Enlightenment, a slowly-unfolding revolution in philosophy that came to shape the progress of science and, in time, dominated Western culture's worldview. One foundation of Enlightenment thinking was to separate anthropology from a theological context. A new dichotomy emerged: "natural" humanity was asserted over against "religious" humanity,"¹ claiming that humanity is most properly understood apart from any relationship to God (and often, apart from any relationship to anything or anyone else), and relegating any *theological* anthropology to secondary status at best. It is only at this time that any sense of the independent study of

¹ Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology*, 7.

anthropology and psychology could be conceptualized, and their growing prevalence was not unrelated to the failures of the church:

[Moralist philosophers of the early modern period] laid the groundwork for a metaphysically neutral and uninhibitedly secular conception of the human being. The latter was no longer defined in primarily theological or metaphysical terms but was viewed empirically as part of the natural world and in a context provided by the resuscitated Stoic philosophy of late antiquity. The ‘new anthropology’ became the basis for the secular culture that arose after the confessional wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This culture developed in detachment from the Christian churches that were still battling each other.²

Since these ideas have taken hold, preaching has taken many approaches, with some preachers trying to resist or ignore Enlightenment constructs, some others incorporating them, and still others who, while trying to oppose modern assumptions and preserve space for the theological outlook, do so in the terms of Enlightenment discourse, and so may undermine their own endeavor.³ Whatever approach is taken, all Christian anthropologies since the Enlightenment must be adaptive and constructive. A truly naïve reading of biblical perspectives is no longer possible (if it ever was).⁴ We cannot simply quote the Bible, yet building an anthropology on the Scriptural sources is important not only because that is part of the definition of faithfulness this thesis has adopted, but because, even in the post-Enlightenment period, it is those anthropologies that result from dynamic engagement with Scriptural perspectives that have showed the most staying power and that have offered a distinct voice in the modern world. In the world of science

² Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 17.

³ This is philosopher Charles Taylor’s critique of Christian apologetics. In attempting to defend the faith, “the responses themselves have already conceded the game; that is, the responses to this diminishment of transcendence already accede to it in important ways... God is reduced to a creator and religion is reduced to morality.” Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, 51.

⁴ This is Taylor’s critique of fundamentalism: by claiming scientific truth and insisting on literalism, “no one is more modern than a fundamentalist.” Ibid., 72.

and humanism, just as in the world of Platonism and scholasticism, a *biblical* anthropology is foundational to the proclamation of the gospel with specificity and power.

One theological response to the Enlightenment separation between “natural humanity” and “religious humanity” is to deny the premise. In *Creation and Law*, Gustav Wingren explores the Christian belief in creation apart from the restrictions and distinctions that the Enlightenment inserted into doctrine:

Belief in Creation does not mean primarily that the world has been created but that ‘God created me and all creatures.’ My life depends on the fact that God creates. Our relation to the Creator is given through life itself and remains even if men do not use the term ‘God.’⁵

In asserting theological anthropology, he can state simply, “life itself constitutes an established relationship to God.”⁶

Charles Taylor’s complex analysis of the post-Enlightenment world disarms the secular critique of faith while critically examining the world secularity has created. After several centuries of dominance, Taylor is, at crucial points, unimpressed by the modern project’s ability to create the “human flourishing” that is its goal.⁷ As interpreted by James K. A. Smith, he sees such simple substitutions as the “therapeutic” for the “spiritual.”⁸ A particularly interesting critique is to note the lack of answers in the area of what empowers people for good:

The [modern moral order] significantly ramps up our moral *expectations*; indeed, we’ve gone beyond the Smithian vision of self-interest benefitting the whole. In a

⁵ Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 32.

⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁷ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, 83.

⁸ Ibid., 106-109.

real sense, the [modern moral order] is a high calling to altruism and other-regard. However, because of an inadequate appreciation for moral *sources*, modernity fixates on moral *articulation* – a fixation on more and more scrupulous codes of behavior ... We don't know how to *make* people moral, but we do know how to specify rules [from 'political correctness' to human rights. But] codes don't make people care for their neighbor; [they] are inadequate as *moral sources* precisely because they do not touch on the dynamics of moral motivation... 'For clearly moving higher in the dimension of reconciliation and trust involves a kind of motivational conversion.' (emphasis original)⁹

Thus the post-Enlightenment world has the vision of *shalom* but not the means.

Luther would recognize the predicament; without gospel there is only law.

Like Wingren, Taylor resists the compartmentalization of God in modern thought.

He does not accept the "pre-shrunk religion" that reduces faith to "mere belief in supernatural entities. Instead, he emphasizes that "a *transformation perspective* is essential to religion" (emphasis original).¹⁰ Faith is a way of life, and a means of transformation. Taylor recognizes in modernity a return to philosophical misunderstandings of humanity, only this time, the "soul" part of the dualism is dismissed – instead of bifurcation of the person, there is merely reduction. Yet despite this reductionist understanding of human-as-machine, there is simultaneously an alienation from bodily existence, what Taylor calls "excarnation" – "a move of disembodiment and abstraction, an aversion of and flight from the particularities of embodiment."¹¹ Taylor sees clearly the heart of the modern project: step by step, we have been willing to accept the "disenchantment" of the world in exchange for a decreasing sense of our own vulnerability.¹²

⁹ Ibid., 128.

¹⁰ Ibid., 53, 82.

¹¹ Ibid., 58.

¹² Ibid., 29.

The greatest insights within the church have been a rediscovery of the unity of the human person and humanity's relational identity. Biblical scholars, most notably Hans Walter Wolff and those have followed his work, rediscovered the Old Testament on its own terms, and then the New Testament in light of the Old. This growing body of work has led to a clarity in biblical anthropology that is perhaps unparalleled since New Testament times. Theologian Karl Barth could speak of the human person as a “‘bodily soul, as he is also besouled body.’ Therefore the person is not simply a soul that ‘has’ a body...Soul would not be soul if it were not bodily soul. And body would not be body if it were not ensouled body.”¹³ In the recovery of the human person's identity-in-relationship, the work of the Jewish scholar Martin Buber is most often mentioned.¹⁴

In these renewed endeavors, the Christian faith has found interesting points of conversation with the post-Enlightenment thought-world. F. LeRon Schults traces a trajectory in modern philosophy, particularly through the contributions of Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel, away from the autonomous individual toward relationality as a paradigm of personhood,¹⁵ a movement paralleled in theology with the result that some convergence has been possible. Wolfhart Pannenberg sees possibilities for convergence between nontheological approaches to anthropology and the work of Augustine which is still fundamental to the church's reflection. This is made possible by the surprising modernity of Augustine's approach, “the empirical orientation of Augustine's

¹³ Quoted in Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology*, 210.

¹⁴ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner, 1958).

¹⁵ Schults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality*, 11 ff.

psychological description” of sin, and his concern for “empirical psychological data.”¹⁶

Mirroring biblical anthropological insights into the unity of the human person, neuroscientific insights are leading the medical and psychological fields to reconsider the dualisms of mind/body and mind/brain in favor of a “monistic perspective.”¹⁷

Two further developments have resulted from dialogue between theology and Post-Enlightenment anthropology. The first has been a desire to affirm the goodness of humanity. Some of this pressure comes from the modern world’s resistance to seeing anthropology in theological terms, thus rejected unflattering categories such as sin, but some comes from the legitimate critique of the excesses of historical church doctrine. Some of the pressure has come from within the church, from biblical understandings that assert created goodness. As an example, the “Creation Spirituality” movement associated with Matthew Fox draws especially on the wisdom literature of the Bible and the mystical tradition of the church to resist the “pessimism and anthropocentrism” of the Fall/Redemption schema.¹⁸

The second essential recent contribution to anthropology, both within the church and outside it, has been the beginning of a critical examination of all the ways, both subtle and deliberate, that the experience of adult males of privilege has been taken as normative in anthropological reflection. All the forms and products of this re-evaluation of traditional assumptions would stretch far beyond the limits of this thesis, but it cannot

¹⁶ Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, 91.

¹⁷ Joel B. Green, *What About the Soul? Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).151

¹⁸ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), 4.

go entirely unmentioned in a thesis whose topic, not many decades ago, would have been referred to as “the Doctrine of Man.”

Reclaiming Law and Gospel

The law and gospel tradition of preaching has continued through the changes in historical era, but it requires reinterpreting with the changes in culture. Nineteenth-century German historian Wilhelm Dithley is attributed with asking, in his time, “How can we proclaim Luther’s solution to people who don’t have Luther’s problem?” It may be more theologically precise to ask, “How do we preach to people who do not have Luther’s problem *only*, or to people who have Luther’s problem, but do not experience it as Luther did?” A commitment to Luther’s theology of grace requires an answer to the questions, “What does grace look like in our time? What does grace feel like to listeners to today’s sermons?” Richard Lischer summarizes the changes in preaching from Luther’s time to our own:

Contemporary preaching takes as its true text Scripture and the wisdom of all that is not Scripture. While Luther may have been confronted with two theologies or two methods, he was not faced with two worlds nor the necessity of justifying one to the other. Because the human nature of the listener was part of that one world in which he moved, Luther had a deeper and more unified understanding of his hearers than does the contemporary preacher... Today, the much-heralded urgency of preaching has to do with the many human problems that must be solved. The individual is haunted by anxiety, the nation is torn by division, the world is threatened by destruction. These and host of lesser problems demand the attention of preaching.¹⁹

Perhaps the most successful adaptation and re-interpretation of this tradition of preaching came in Herman Stuempfle’s *Preaching Law and Gospel*. Stuempfle’s first contribution was to rethink the preaching of law, following Paul Tillich, who spoke of the

¹⁹ Lischer, “Luther and Contemporary Preaching: Narrative and Anthropology,” 502-503.

law's function as a "mirror of existence."²⁰ Instead of focusing first on the theological truth of human culpability, as had been the pattern since Luther, this puts the focus on, simply, truth – the agreed-upon and observable truth of the human situation. In this understanding, Stuenpfe says, the focus of the law is less on the *conscience* than on the *consciousness* of the listener; "judgment is not so much an attack from above as a threat from within the actualities of our life."²¹ While this appears to be a novel understanding of the law, it is clear that even Luther would preach the law in various modes, such as "anxiety, despair, and the fear of death, as well as guilt."²² Further, upon reflection, if the preacher has established a consciousness of human existence as it is, the theological element and even the aspect of culpability can be added: the question, "and are we not responsible to God for this?" will rarely need to be spoken, and if it is, it will likely be met with acceptance. Implied in Stuenpfe's analysis is the need, in the modern world, to meet the people where they are and begin from the post-Enlightenment stance of a non-theological anthropology. Then, before the gospel can be preached in its fullness, the people must not only hear the law but invited to live their existential truth *coram Deo*.²³

Stuenpfe's greatest contribution, however, is his corresponding reformulation of what the gospel can be. Preachers already knew that there were many other problems facing humanity, they just did not know how to preach to them. Stuenpfe finds ways for the Reformation preacher to stop trying the "round peg" of the absolution of sin in every "square hole" of the human dilemma. Stuenpfe suggests that the gospel can be

²⁰ Stuenpfe, *Preaching Law and Gospel*, 21, 23-32.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²² *Ibid.*, 49.

²³ *Ibid.*, 24.

formulated as a response that corresponds to the human need presenting itself in text and context. It need not be formulated the same every time – he calls it an “antiphon to existence... a voice lifted in response to another voice.”²⁴ He sees limitless options, but offers several as examples, shown here alongside the Reformation’s default pattern:

Table 4: Stuempfle's Analysis and Examples of the Law/Gospel Dynamic²⁵

<i>Law as “Mirror of Existence”</i>	<i>Gospel as “Antiphon of Existence”</i>
alienation	reconciliation
anxiety	certitude
despair	hope
transiency	homecoming
Reformation default: “The Hammer of Judgment”	Reformation default: “The Gift of Forgiveness”

The research in this thesis is largely based on Stuempfle’s insight that, reconceiving the law as a “mirror of existence,” the gospel can be formulated in as many ways as the human condition presents itself. Preachers can trust that God responds to human need, and, with the help of our diverse and powerful biblical witness to God’s action in the world, they need only to find the words.

W. Paul Jones arrives at a similar analysis, but from a different direction. In *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief*, using hundreds of interviews, he endeavored to explore the patterns of how individuals make

²⁴ Ibid., 48.

²⁵ Ibid., 50-58.

meaning in their lives, and to group those patterns.²⁶ The result was five clusters, which he terms “theological Worlds.” Each theological world has an “essential rhythm,” which is in the form of a law/gospel word pair. Jones goes further, to offer several other characteristics of each world: a “feeling of existence,” a concrete articulation of the fallen human condition which he terms “*obsessio*,” and a concrete vision of salvation which he terms “*epiphania*.”

Table 5: W. Paul Jones' Analysis of "Theological Worlds"²⁷

<i>Essential Rhythm</i>	<i>Feel</i>	<i>Obsessio</i> (human condition)	<i>Epiphania</i> (salvation)
Separation and Reunion	Longing	Isolation experienced as abandonment	Coming home / Being home (harmony)
Conflict and Vindication	Anger (rage)	Normlessness experienced as chaos	New Earth (consummation)
Emptiness and Fulfillment	Ache (void)	Self-estrangement experienced as impotence	Wholeness (enriched belonging)
Condemnation and Forgiveness	Guilt	Powerlessness experienced as idolatry	Adoption (reprieve)
Suffering and Endurance	Overwhelmed	Meaninglessness experienced as engulfment	Survival (integrity)

²⁶ W. Paul Jones, *Theological Worlds : Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 16.

²⁷ Ibid., 42-43.

Engaging the various ways people make meaning, Jones suggests, requires being able to speak of God's work in the terms of each of these meaning-making systems.

"What is new is the discovery of theological Worlds as *pluralistic*, and thus the need of the church to be self-consciously *variegated*" (emphasis original). The implications for proclamation are clear: the absolutizing of one system will confuse or alienate many people, while preaching that can move between these different ways of making meaning will proclaim the gospel in ways that many more people can hear. Jones sees the church failing in important ways: "liberal" churches tolerate a wide variety of meaning-making patterns but tend not engage any of them enough to stimulate growth, while "conservative" churches tend engage deeply, but in only one "theological World." "We need the contributions of both factions, without their liabilities."²⁸

Jones sees in Christian theology as it is generally practiced a resistance to the idea that there are different patterns of meaning making, but suggests the resources to deal with this plurality may be closer than we think:

Are the contrasting obsessions that characterize individual Worlds reducible in the end to one? Or at least, is there a composite human condition for which all five are ingredients in or variations on a primal theme? Or do these obsessions represent, to the end, an irreducible pluralism? While Christian theologians tend to write as if there were a single obsession, such descriptions serve as least common denominator only through abstraction. [On the contrary,] Our present biblical writings are the result of editing from contrasting resources, and as a result, Scripture is a composite of contrasting perspectives which reflect the theological Worlds through which various editors perceived an ordering whole.²⁹

In other words, our diverse Scriptures set Christianity on a path to a diversity of patterns of meaning-making, but those same diverse Scriptures offer preachers the

²⁸ Ibid., 11-12.

²⁹ Ibid., 241.

richness of reflection and variety of perspective needed to address any and all of these patterns.

In *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching*, Paul Scott Wilson lays out a detailed method for preaching that includes, among other things, a flexible application of law and gospel. His approach to this long tradition of preaching is to leave behind the “baggage” and start again with fresh language, often speaking of “God’s grace” for gospel, and “human brokenness and sin” or simply “trouble,” for the law.³⁰ These new terms serve the preacher well: “trouble” is an open-ended term that serves the same function as Stuenkel’s understanding of the law as a “mirror of existence.” Both are simply an invitation to tell the truth about what is wrong. “God’s grace” is a fine substitute term for gospel, and again, allows for a responsive or “antiphonal” proclamation of God’s action, correlated specifically to what had been identified as “trouble.”

The “four pages” are not simply a form, but stand for “four basic kinds of theological focus.”³¹ Wilson has come to speak of the four pages as a theological grammar for preaching, much like Stuenkel’s conception: “whatever other elements contribute to the making of a sermon, there is a certain theological substructure which is indispensable.”³² The pages are: 1. trouble in the text, 2. trouble in the world, 3. grace in the text, and 4. grace in the world. The four pages form a grid of text and context crossed

³⁰ Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 77-79. “Generally we cannot speak of God’s grace without first identifying human brokenness and sin... We cannot get to a strong theology of grace except via a strong theology of human trouble.”

³¹ Ibid., 15.

³² Stuenkel, *Preaching Law and Gospel*, 11.

with law and gospel. Put into practice, this grammar of proclamation has several benefits to the preacher. For preachers outside the law and gospel tradition, it offers an approachable way in: the “four pages” pattern mimics the traditional expository sermon’s movement from exposition to application, but then insists that it be done a second time, this time focusing on God’s grace.³³ For the preacher in the tradition of law and gospel, there are several more benefits. One is mentioned above, the flexibility in discerning the law based on what about the human predicament is presenting in the warranting text and the context of the preaching event. Another is the insistence, in Pages Three and Four, that the good news be found not only in the text, but also pointed to or evoked in the real world. In practice, this is an invitation to envision humanity redeemed in Christ and point to where it may be glimpsed.

Beyond the four pages themselves, several other pieces of Wilson’s method further elucidate the human condition. First, there is a helpful insistence on beginning with Scripture, that the Bible would be the foundation and first move of the sermon, not just in the revelation of God’s gracious solution, but in the revelation of the problem as well. Second, throughout his book, Wilson calls preachers again and again to “filming” the trouble and grace, his way of insisting that the human condition be depicted with concreteness and narrative particularity. This echoes the narrative theology of the Old Testament and the Gospels, and it applies both to the “trouble” and to the “grace.” Third, an interesting term is offered in a section that acts as prelude to the four pages, cataloguing tools for “ensuring sermon unity:” “need.” “Every effective sermon must

³³ Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching*, 78.

have relevance and address a need in the lives of the congregation.”³⁴ This category of “need,” in practice, becomes a sort of bridge, beginning with the human condition as law (or the “trouble in the world” as Wilson calls it) and reaching toward the correlated gospel message. Put another way, framing the human dilemma in terms of need begins to anticipate the thing that would meet the need. Thinking in terms of human need anticipates the rhythm of sickness and healing, sin and forgiveness, estrangement and reconciliation, and so on. “Need” is human trouble consciously acknowledged, plus a first glimmer of hope that the need may be met.

The “Fallen Condition Focus”

Bryan Chappell’s *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* was written with a purpose similar to Wilson’s *Four Pages*. Both saw the shortcomings of the of exposition/application model, that God’s grace or the message of Christ may be too often neglected. Chappell is not in the tradition of law and gospel, but he does offer a term that has been useful to this thesis. Similar to Wilson’s tools for ensuring sermon unity, Chappell uses the term “Fallen Condition Focus” for a starting point that sets a sermon on a faithful and logical path: “The Fallen Condition Focus (FCF) is the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God’s people to glorify and enjoy him.”³⁵ The “FCF requires a sermon to deal honestly and directly with the human concerns in the text,” and it is concrete: “Generic statements of an FCF give the preacher

³⁴ Ibid., 48.

³⁵ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2005), 50.

little guidance for the organization of the sermon and the congregation little reason for listening. Specificity tends to breed interest and power.”³⁶ The “Fallen Condition Focus” is to be anchored in Scripture, and, like both Stuempfle’s understanding of the law and Wilson’s trouble, the FCF is meant to serve the gospel: “Preaching that remains true to [its] God-glorifying purpose specifies an FCF indicated by a text and addresses this aspect of our fallenness with the grace revealed by the text.”³⁷ The term makes obvious Chapell’s intention that the preacher focus on the human condition as *fallen*, but he does acknowledge that the human condition is not a term co-extensive with “sin.”

Specific sins such as unforgiveness, lying and racism are frequently the FCF of a passage, but a sin does not always have to be the FCF of a sermon. Grief, illness, longing for the Lord’s return, the need to know how to share the gospel, and the desire to be a better parent are not sins, but they are needs that our fallen condition imposes and that Scripture addresses... *An FCF need not be something for which we are guilty or culpable.* [Yet,] an FCF is always phrased in negative terms. It is something wrong (though not necessarily a moral evil) that needs correction or encouragement from Scripture. (emphasis original)³⁸

While helpful in many ways, the term and concept of the FCF may close some avenues for proclamation. In an attempt to be faithful to the Apostle Paul’s understandings, other biblical voices may be muted by this approach, or distorted in an attempt to make them fit. The FCF does not arise from the text, but is extrapolated backwards from the solution that seems to be proposed in the text. This thesis will propose that the benefits of the FCF may be retained without its drawbacks and rigidity by considering, instead, a “Human Condition Focus” that is more flexible in application and more faithful to the diversity and complexity of the biblical witness.

³⁶ Ibid., 50-51.

³⁷ Ibid., 270.

³⁸ Ibid., 51-52.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The primary tool for this research is a journal with accompanying materials, collected from preaching colleagues written over a period of engagement with these ideas. Preachers representing as diverse a cross-section as possible were invited to keep this journal and collect supplementary materials over several months from late spring to winter of 2015.

From the beginning, the project was conceived of as a collaboration in qualitative research. As both researcher and participant, it would have been impossible for me not to be influenced by the reading and reflection that led to choosing and developing this thesis topic. Throughout the period of journaling, I regularly provided participants with insights from the earlier chapters as they were being written, as a stimulus to potential new approaches or patterns of thought. In some instances, those insights can be seen incorporated into preacher's journals; in other instances, journal entries contain what seem to be rebuttals of those insights, or caveats to them. The topic frequently became part of discussion between colleagues at text studies and other venues. The goal was a rich period of reflection on theology and practice, fueled both by internal contemplation and by external information and discussion.

Overview of Research Tools

The primary instrument of research is a journal inviting preachers to reflect on biblical anthropology each time they preached, or as often as they were willing, recording the text or texts on which the sermon was based and prompting their reflections on the preaching process. Each *sermon entry* in the journal answers a few open-ended questions about how the preacher moved from text to sermon: what the foundational understanding of the human condition is, how it arose from the text or from the interpretive process, and how it shaped the sermon. Written prompts encouraged journaling preachers to consider whether their interpretation is in the mainstream of Christian tradition, or a faithful but innovative insight; whether their perspective on human experience is one they expect the listening congregation to accept easily or with difficulty; and, if they suspect a particular insight is going to be difficult to accept or understand for the average member, strategies for how will they communicate it adequately or explain in persuasively. The journal provided to participating preachers is presented in Appendix A.

A second instrument was included in the same journal, asking participating preachers to provide initial and final journal entries, as a means of tracking change in thinking and practice through their time of participation. The *initial entry* asked the preachers to examine their assumptions and default sources for the understanding of theological anthropology that has shaped their sermons: Are the human situation and theological anthropology categories that they think of often in preparing to preach? When considering these categories, do they draw from confessional or theological sources, specific biblical sources, or from other fields of study? What is their opinion of the common assumptions of our culture? This intentional reflection at the start of the process

was designed to help them find the language for subsequent sermon entries, so that, in further reflection and writing, they can consciously examine their own assumptions and habitual practices, noting how their usual approaches play out in practice, and noting as well when they are attempting a new approach. For the purposes of the research, the initial entry provided a benchmark for a comparison of understandings and commitments; the *final entry* provided the other benchmark, and led preachers to reflect on the benefits and possibilities for preaching of this intentional reflection on the human condition in which they had engaged for their weeks or months of journaling. These final entries contain the preacher's own assessment of the project, and their more-developed insights into the overall topic. The prompts for the initial and final entries are part of the journal provided to participating preachers presented in Appendix A.

A third instrument involved the journal combined with additional materials to produce a case study built around a single preaching event. After generating the journal entry on the sermon preparation process, especially in cases when the preacher experienced something particularly noteworthy as a result of this intentional reflection, journaling preachers were invited to create an individual *sermon case study* made up of the initial journal entry, a manuscript or transcript of what was said in preaching, and a collection of forms from congregational members who heard it. A *sermon listener feedback survey* was provided that focused on whether listeners understood the preacher's claims or implications about the human situation, and whether they accepted them to be true. If the preacher tried to persuade listeners of a truth, were they persuaded? Did the claims about human condition ring true with the listener's own experience? Did the good news proclaimed in the sermon correspond to the problem rooted in human

reality? Together with a set of journal entries and a sermon manuscript, listener feedback forms complete a sermon case study of significant depth, giving insight to the whole process of preaching from the first interaction with the text, through the preparation and delivery of the sermon, and on into the thoughts and lives of the congregation. For the journaling preacher, the congregational feedback also offered valuable insight, providing further fuel for reflection in subsequent journal entries. Sermon listener feedback surveys provided the strongest evidence of sermon effectiveness. The sermon listener feedback survey provided to participating congregation members is presented in Appendix B.

Following a period of informal sharing about this project, nineteen preachers who showed interest were formally invited to participate, representing seven different Christian denominations in six different U.S. states and one Canadian province. Some of the nineteen declined to participate. Others signed “Informed Consent” forms and received the materials, but did not begin collecting data, stepping away from the process for various reasons and at various times in the process. At the end of the data collection period, twelve completed journals were received, varying greatly in length, from one sermon entry to twenty-three.

The twelve participating preachers, including the researcher, were five women and seven men. They represented six denominational affiliations (with one currently serving in a non-denominational context): the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the Episcopal Church, The Salvation Army, the United Methodist Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Their preaching took place in a variety of contexts, from missions to long-established congregations, small to large, in Manitoba, Ontario, Texas, Wisconsin, California,

Pennsylvania, and Michigan. Several used the Revised Common Lectionary during the period of journaling, leading to several collections of sermon entries on the same texts (although in several cases, preachers preaching on the same set of texts found a different text to be the dominant one in their sermon preparation). A few preachers used the Narrative Lectionary, and several either did not use a lectionary or did not use one consistently, leading to sermon entries on a variety of other texts not found in the Revised Common Lectionary during the period of journaling. In addition to answering the prompts, a few preachers included sermon drafts or manuscripts as part of the entries.

The twelve completed journals contained 91 sermon entries and 10 pairs of initial and final entries (and one journal that had an initial entry but no final entry). Four of the sermon entries provided no discernable relationship between the biblical text preached and the journal entry's reflection, and so they were excluded from further analysis. The 87 remaining sermon entries are arranged in canonical order by primary preaching text and presented in Appendix C. The initial/final entry pairs are presented in Appendix D. Three preachers went on to collect the materials for sermon case studies, generating a total of eight complete case studies, which are presented in Appendix E.

Methodology and Assessment

The data will be analyzed using grounded theory, in the method laid out by Kathy Charmaz. The emphasis in grounded theory is in constructing "abstract analytic categories" rather than "sorting topics," creating a report that is "an analytical product

rather than a purely descriptive account.”¹ A description of grounded theory methods is presented in Appendix F.

While grounded theory emphasizes openness to the emergence of new categories and interpretations, some analysis will be structured according to the original goals of the study. Several categories will be applied to the sermon entries from the preachers’ journals. In those entries where an understanding of the human condition is stated or can be reasonably inferred, that understanding will be categorized as either *negative* in the moral sense, such as those emphasizing human sinfulness, *positive*, such as those emphasizing human goodness, potential or capacity, or *neutral*, such as those stating value-neutral commonalities of human experience. Observations about human limitation, while negative in one sense, do not have moral bearing and so will be categorized as neutral.

Journal prompts also asked preachers about their strategies for communicating their understanding of the human condition to the congregation, and, if necessary, persuading them of it. This question rests in part on whether the understanding of the human condition the preacher is preaching resonates with the preacher’s own experience, and in part on the preacher’s estimation of how closely it will match the listener’s experiences and self-understanding. Conceivably, some sermons may require significant time and effort dedicated to convincing the congregation that a certain proposition applies to them, and others might rest on an unspoken assumption that a certain truth or experience is universal and universally understood. Both the most thorough argument and

¹ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Inc, 2014), 15.

the unspoken assumption can fail if they misjudge the listeners, so strategy is an important consideration and will be considered in the coding of each entry.

The case studies will add the new dimension of what the listeners' experience. Some insights may be gained by comparing the preacher's words in a sermon entry to the preacher's words in the corresponding sermon, but the key insights will be judging by the listeners' responses whether strategies were successful: whether communication happened as intended, whether the preacher's assumptions were justified, and whether the gospel proclaimed in the sermon connected with the listeners' own needs and self-understanding.

Each of the five questions on the sermon listeners' feedback survey was designed to elucidate one step in a chain of logic necessary for the communication of the gospel. The first question asks the listener to write the human condition as it was communicated in the sermon. This will show to what extent the listeners' adopt the preacher's language in their articulation of the human condition, or whether they tend to make their own articulations. These answers will also reveal any misunderstanding of the sermon's articulation of the human condition, and any resistance to it on the part of the listener. The second question asks if the listener can relate to that statement of the human condition; a particularly effective sermon might elicit several references to specific life situations and experiences at this point. The third question asks the listener to relate this articulation to the biblical texts. While it is not necessary for the listeners to be able to connect the articulation of the human condition to the biblical text in order for it to be a faithful interpretation, there are certainly advantages in credibility and memorability if those connections are made. The fourth question asks for a statement of the good news

the listener heard. This is the final test of effectiveness, since the good news the preacher intends to convey is contingent on the communication of the human condition and its acceptance by the listener. If there is a misunderstanding of the gospel, or a failure to hear good news in the sermon or to accept it, this line of questioning would give insight into whether the failure to communicate the gospel is rooted in a miscommunication of some kind regarding the human condition. The fifth question is intended to be an open-ended prompt, allowing the respondent to add or qualify any previous statements, or to add new thoughts or connections.

The initial and final entries from the preacher's journals will be coded according to grounded theory to see what may emerge, looking especially for any changes, stated or demonstrated, that may have occurred through this period of reflective practice. From the initial entries, I intend to compile a list of references cited by the preachers as most influential in their thinking about theological anthropology. From the final entries, I expect to hear from the preachers in their own words what is most important in approaching the process of preaching, and what works.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Preachers' Influences and Commitments

When prompted to write about their influences as they approach the task of preaching, each of the eleven preachers who provided initial journal entries had distinct touchstones, yet several patterns emerged in their approaches and thinking. The most common theme was to look to denominational traditions: five preachers cited their roots or tradition's founder, with one mention of Salvation Army doctrines and two each of John Calvin and Martin Luther (with one of the Calvinists mentioning Arminianism as well). Interestingly, that leaves six preachers who did not mention their denominational affiliation among their influences. Two of those who do claim their confessional heritage also specifically mention other influences that in some way counterbalance that tradition.¹

Some twentieth-century theologians made the preachers' lists, including Paul Tillich and Wolfhart Pannenberg, and one New Testament Scholar, N.T. Wright, along with some theological schools of thought: Preacher J mentioned specifically feminist and womanist theology (alongside John Calvin). Several preachers and scholars of preaching were mentioned, including Paul Scott Wilson (twice), Barbara Brown Taylor, and Herman Stuempfle, and roughly the same quote from Fred Craddock was cited by two of them (although Preacher J could not remember who said it): "I think it is Fred Craddock

¹ Appendix D: Preachers G and J.

who describes imagining a group of parishioners sitting in your study with you as you write the sermon.”²

Beyond these broad categories, several preachers had their own signatures. Preacher D’s thinking about anthropology is strongly influenced by science, mentioning biology, evolution, and psychology (through the writing of Robert Beck on “disgust psychology”). Preacher J also mentions the neurobiology that underlies human decision making, and uses the term “egotism,” from psychology. Preacher G cites diverse influences: “Obviously Luther has informed my anthropology, although I must also give a nod to Dorothy Day, Pierre Tielhard de Chardin, and my wife, who have taught me to be more patient toward myself and others.” Preacher H is a student of post-modern philosophy and comparative religions, citing John Caputo, Merold Westphal, Jacques Derrida, and Carl Raschke, together with Rabbi Brad Hirshfield (all after starting with Calvin and Arminius). Preacher K stands out by citing two authors, Wendell Berry and Marilynne Robinson, both essayists and novelists, as sources for understanding the human condition, along with anthropologist Clifford Geertz. In the same reflection, these modern insights are followed by engagement with all three articles of the Apostles’ Creed (by the only preacher to mention a creed). Preacher D does not mention literature directly, but makes a clear and thought-provoking reference to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in writing of God’s ability to stir possibility in the midst of human limitation: “The repetitive, relentless nature of ‘tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow’ is broken by God’s promises and becomes ‘tomorrow but tomorrow but tomorrow.’”

² Appendix D: Preacher B.

Biblical influences showed similar shared patterns and areas of distinction. Paul's Letter to the Romans was most often mentioned, with two references to Romans 3:23-24, referring to the universal sinfulness of humanity and justification by grace, and one to Romans 8:15-16, 22-23, referring to humanity's "future... fully tied up with God's saving of all material reality."³ Preacher J also alludes to Psalm 8, Preacher H mentions Zechariah 7:9-10 and Micah 6:8, and Preacher K, interestingly, refers to Genesis 2 (rather than Genesis 1 or 3). Preacher F refers to the image of God (drawn from Genesis 1), as well as the Fall (Genesis 3). Preacher A also refers to the Fall as it is stated in the Salvation Army's third doctrine.

Several classic doctrines make an appearance in the preachers' reflections: Preacher D uses language reminiscent of Luther's sense that fallen humanity is *incurvatus in se*, or curved in upon itself, while Preacher G directly cites Luther's teaching that the Christian is *simul justus et peccator* or simultaneously justified (or saint) and sinner. Preacher H uses the Calvinist term "total depravity," while Preacher J, also citing Calvin, elaborates on the same theme at some length. The term "grace," or in one case, "prevenient grace," makes many appearances, as does the term "sin." Preachers F and G specifically mention preaching law and gospel.

Yet several other categories are shared by multiple preachers. Relationship as foundational to the human experience is discussed by four preachers. Preacher A defines sin as damage to relationships. Preacher B cites Tillich to define sin "as that which separates us from God." Preacher D speaks of humanity's relational nature in several ways: in terms of being open or not to others, whether that is toward God or other people,

³ Appendix D: Preachers A and J; K.

and in terms of social boundaries, regarding in-groups and out-groups. Preacher K makes a poetic observation: “We are remarkable, mysterious, beautiful beings caught up in a web of influences and relationships... When we... reflect upon who we are, we discover that most of who we are has been passed down to us. We are material vessels of memory.”

Two other theological categories were mentioned by more than one preacher: incarnation and eschatology. Preacher D speaks of the incarnation as the scandalous blurring of the boundaries which otherwise define and limit human life, while Preacher K writes that “Jesus is the embodiment of God's oneness with all creation, the one whose life is connected to God's eternal life.” Regarding eschatology, Preacher K's conviction that the future of humanity is bound to the future of creation is cited above, while Preacher A summarizes N. T. Wright's approach: “His theology of heaven coming down and of the Earth being recreated is foundational in my understanding of anthropology. It is not about heaven, it is about healing the brokenness of the earth and every living thing upon the earth.”

One preacher lays out a rather sophisticated systematic anthropology, crediting readings in Pannenberg specifically with the basis of these insights:

Whenever I think about the human condition I always end up with some kind of formulation about the tension between being finite creatures with an awareness of the infinite. Our self-awareness both allows us to see beyond ourselves and to be open to what is beyond and at the same time self-awareness imposes boundaries, defining or proscribing me in relation to another.⁴

This articulation is strikingly modern and abstract, while still maintaining many concrete points of connection to human experience and much biblical resonance.

⁴ Appendix D: Preacher D.

A theme common to many was the idea that knowing their parishioners' stories and sharing life experiences with them is an important source of insight into the human condition. They mention "connecting the text with life," and "finding where the text intersects with the life of the people I am serving and then working in a way to make the text come alive and influence the life of the congregation."⁵ Preacher B writes, "I think about the people in the congregation who may be hearing this sermon. I think about the stories of people in the pews. I ask myself what these people need to hear." This suggests a pastoral impulse in preaching. In a particularly interesting passage, one preacher struggles with what it means to be pastoral; after laying out at some length a Calvinistic theology of human depravity, the preacher muses:

So how do you begin preaching with/for/to that kind of attitude? You certainly don't start with berating. This is where the Baptists get the bad wrap from the Presby[terian]s. We realize that fire and brimstone just won't get you too far. In seminary, we like to call that 'being pastoral.' Pastoral being another word for nice. I hate that. I don't want to be nice in the pulpit.⁶

While reflecting on the practice of law and gospel preaching, Preacher G shares a pastoral hunch and a pastoral response:

That we are '*Simul justus et peccator*' is certain, but my inclination when preaching is to believe that the hearers know themselves to be more sinner than saint. Or, cast apart from the moral freight the word "sin" might conjure, hearers know themselves to have failed to live up to the unvoiced but existentially tangible demands for success, be it defined materially or spiritually. In short, hearers show up Sunday already feeling a bit beat up. I am honest in naming the condition that is our brokenness, but I dwell there only as long as needed to move to the answer to our defeat, which is the victory of Christ.⁷

⁵ Appendix D: Preachers E and I.

⁶ Appendix D: Preacher J.

⁷ Appendix D: Preacher G

Sermon Entries - Overview

It is a fascinating exercise to view the reflections of twelve preachers on their efforts to produce 87 sermons. To be found in these entries are familiar theological frameworks fleshed out for a particular context at a particular time, as well as rare or novel approaches, perhaps suggested by a certain text, and attempted for the first time. There are familiar biblical characters and texts represented in these sermons as well as more obscure names and passages, together with references to the West Wing, Harry Potter, Star Wars, Norman Rockwell, Harriet Tubman, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and the Second Law of Thermodynamics! One sermon was delivered in the first person by the character of Eve, another contained a "want ad" with a job description for the Messiah, and another began with the scriptures being read aloud inside a tent!⁸ These sermon entries are a window into the thoughts and imaginations of faithful and daring preachers. At the same time, they are clearly products of the needs and experiences of particular congregations and shaped by the times in which they were produced.

At least 18 of the 87 sermon entries mentioned, in some form, an element of their context that played a significant role in shaping the sermon. The news cycle and the shared life of the community or congregation were frequent themes in preachers' reflection on the human condition. The mass shooting in a Charleston church was mentioned four times, the attack on Paris three times, and the presidential campaign twice, while other sermons were shaped by the Pope's visit to the U.S., the European migrant crisis, and migrant detention facilities in the U.S.⁹ Within the local parish, one

⁸ Appendix C: sermon entries 1, 33, and 85.

⁹ Appendix C: sermon entries 16, 21, 23, and 25; 49, 50, and 51; 33 and 65; 43; 6; 49.

sermon surveyed local economic and family structures, while another couple dealt with local flood relief; one sermon coincided with a congregational day of service, another with the commissioning of lay ministers, and another with a pair of baptisms; one came in the aftermath of the terminal diagnosis of a beloved deacon, and another was shaped by the preacher's personal reflection on a recent pastoral visit.¹⁰ Certainly, many more sermons made mention of these events and others like them, but these were instances where the preachers referred to these events as having shaped their interaction with the biblical texts and the resulting proclamation.

Strategies

One set of prompts for the journaling preachers asked questions of strategy:

How will this understanding [of the human condition] shape the sermon? How will this understanding shape the way the good news is proclaimed? Will the understanding of the human condition be stated or implied?... Will you assume that all or most listeners will accept it as true, or do you plan to persuade them of it?¹¹

The question of approach or rhetorical strategy became among the most fruitful for analysis. Some promising approaches occurred only in one or two sermons, while others began to form a recognizable pattern.

Promising Approaches

Several approaches were only mentioned by a few preachers, but bear further consideration as possible models. One interesting approach came in the form of two sermons that drew their articulation of the human condition from a statement in the text

¹⁰ Appendix C: sermon entries 39; 23 and 57; 35; 8; 69; 13; 68.

¹¹ Appendix A.

itself. This would not be possible with most texts, but is certainly a responsible way to preach on those key biblical texts that establish the human condition most directly. The texts of these sermons were Psalm 8, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (NRSV) and Mark 7:21 “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come” (NRSV).¹²

A notable, and perhaps novel, approach taken in five sermons was simply to deal exclusively with a positive statement of the human condition. Among these 87 sermon entries can be found a sermon about, simply, “the importance of relationships and community celebrations;” a sermon on the anointing of the 70 elders to share in Moses’ prophetic role and an invitation to consider that “humanity redeemed can be useful to God;” and a reflection “on the general worth of human beings” written to counteract what “the congregation [may] have heard about the negative aspects of the human condition... [Consequently,] it will take effort to persuade them that they are worthy of God’s love and are able to spread that love to others.”¹³ In one entry, the preacher is self-consciously positive:

I guess what is novel about this sermon is that I am not dwelling a lot on human sinfulness. I am addressing the human condition as something positive – the focus is on redeemed humanity, not fallen humanity. The gist of how the human condition is articulated is basically to say, in experiencing friendship, we are glimpsing redeemed humanity. Friendship is voluntary (there are no have-tos in friendship), mutual, and egalitarian, and it often brings out the best in us. In seeing and experiencing friendship, we are seeing and experiencing humanity as it was meant to be, and as it will be in the fulfillment of all things. All this reflection arose simply from Jesus using the word ‘friends’ for his disciples... I hope and expect that this will resonate with nearly everyone, having experienced the blessing of friendship at some point in their lives. If they can’t relate at all, then

¹² Appendix C: sermon entries 14; 27.

¹³ Appendix C: sermon entries 56, 7 and 63.

surely they have felt the longing for a friend, and can attach that to the truth that God reaches out to us in friendship.¹⁴

In another entry, the preacher's struggle with the church's language about baptism led to a significantly positive approach to the human condition (though not without nuance):

We had two baptisms that day, a 2-year-old and a 19-year-old, and I found myself struggling to talk about what is happening to them. Our language about baptism is inadequate; either it minimizes the transformation, or it denigrates God's children who are not yet baptized... The section [of the sermon] about Baptism was different. Here the working out of the implications was to say, what has come before in the life of this girl and this woman contains much good. They are already God's beloved people, made in God's image, full of giftedness and potential. And baptism, then, is about that goodness having a future.¹⁵

This positive approach to the human condition connects at many points to other themes in this thesis, that preachers are responsible for taking into account not just the reality of fallen humanity, but the new reality of justified humanity as well. This positive approach also relates to the sections below detailing other combinations of positive, negative, and neutral articulations of the human condition.

The other promising approaches sought ways to convince or persuade listeners of a certain anthropological claim, or to make difficult truths more palatable, or to ensure that hard truths would at least get a hearing. Two sermon entries mentioned humor an approach to get around defensiveness in listeners. One sermon that dealt with passing judgment on others invited the listeners to reflect on times they have been judged harshly, and then called on them to reflect on that experience as a source of compassion for others. Another sermon, based on Genesis 2:18-3:21, was delivered in the first-person by

¹⁴ Appendix C: sermon entry 64.

¹⁵ Appendix C: sermon entry 69.

the character of Eve; this act of personalizing the story invited listeners to empathize with a character they might sooner blame.¹⁶

In one case where the preacher felt that there would be a lot resistance to a text dealing with human evil, the preacher invited the listeners to see that evil in others first, and to recognize how others justify evil with excuses and claims of innocence and good intentions, before turning these same categories to apply to the listeners themselves (a technique reminiscent of the prophet Nathan in II Sam. 12). In another sermon, the preacher set out to describe a variety of ambivalent feelings about miracles, from those who simply cannot believe in them to others who believe but wonder why they cannot have one; the preacher suggested: “I don’t think I will have to persuade anyone, just flesh out the options and contradictions, and they will recognize themselves somewhere in it.”¹⁷

Four other preachers suggested that the best method to gain acceptance from their listeners was to start with something likely to be accepted, and then to move logically or incrementally toward something stronger, that might be less palatable without proper preparation. One began with what is good about a patriotic response in the face of attack and tragedy before intimating the potential dark side of that response: a tendency toward defining “us and them” and demonizing the other. Another, on the topic of facing death, began by describing aspects of contemporary culture that the listeners were expected to accept as true, and then began to show how those aspects are “built around ignoring and denying death.” Two sermons started from a gospel message that the listeners were

¹⁶Appendix C: sermon entries 30 and 27; 52; 1.

¹⁷ Appendix C: sermon entries 27; 72.

expected to accept and then “worked backwards” to the logical truth of the human condition. One of them had quite a simple pattern: if we believe in resurrection, we must know that death comes first. The other began – on Reformation Sunday – with the assumption the congregation would accept that God is gracious, and makes us promises; but “promise as a category demands vulnerability. A promise is not a promise unless there is the potential for failure... We’d rather have certainty.”¹⁸

The “Neutral/Negative” Strategy

Perhaps the most significant pattern to emerge from the sermon entries was one that seems to combine the rhetorical strategies for avoiding or defusing defensiveness in listeners and the observation that the human condition can be presented in positive, negative, or morally neutral terms. The strategy I am calling “neutral/negative” is discernable in some form in 24 of the 87 sermon entries. In some sermons, the preacher took this approach self-reflectively, while in others it is merely apparent in the preacher’s description. Generally speaking, the approach involves presenting a morally neutral form of the human condition as a way of preparing listeners to accept its morally negative, or sinful, form. Having recognized the morally neutral statement of the human condition in themselves, the logic goes, listeners might be more ready to acknowledge their culpability in the morally negative way that same aspect of human nature or experience tends to play out. The variety of texts with which this technique was used show that it is a versatile approach. Three case studies, discussed below, give further insight into this pattern, and overall seem to suggest that hearing the human condition described first in a neutral way does open in listeners the possibility of recognizing that in themselves,

¹⁸ Appendix C: sermon entries 50; 25; 69; 15.

making them that much more likely to acknowledge the negative or sinful side of that condition in themselves as well.

Table 6: The "Neutral/Negative" Preaching Strategy

<i>Entry in Appendix C and primary text</i>	<i>Morally neutral formulation of the human condition</i>	<i>Morally negative formulation of the human condition</i>
2. Genesis 11:1-9	people believe differently, have different faiths	we feel threatened by difference
4. Genesis 18:1-15	we feel disappointed when God does not act	we take things into our own hands
5. Exodus 2:1-10	we feel threatened	we strike out at others
7. Exodus 16:2-15	we have needs and get anxious about them	we complain, whine, get sarcastic, get resentful
12. Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18	we tend toward the status quo	we are lazy and avoid hard work and sacrifice
16. Lamentations 3:22-33	self-preservation	scapegoating
22. Mark 5:21-43	as a creature, we are limited in time and ability	we respond to our limitation with fear, anxiety, and resentment
26. Mark 6:30-34, 53-56	vulnerability, weakness, powerlessness, need	resistance to humility, will not ask for help
30. Mark 7:24-37	natural prejudice and ignorance lead to mistakes	intentional ignorance and hateful prejudice, or too-careful avoidance of difference

32. Mark 8:27-38	incomplete religious knowledge	expecting God to do and be what we want
37. Mark 9:30-37	the vulnerability of children	our denial strategies so that we do not see the vulnerable and feel compelled to help
38. Mark 9:38-50	ignorance	refusal to admit ignorance leads to an inability to learn
39. Mark 10:2-16	rural families are economically dependent on one another	dependence can lead to maintaining unhealthy relationships
39. Mark 10:2-16 (second)	vulnerability of children	not valuing and discarding the vulnerable
41. Mark 10:17-31	we tend to count what we have and compare with others	we are unsatisfied, ungrateful, and we hoard
50. Mark 13:1-8	violent attacks make us anxious	we react with irrational fear, anger, and violence
51. Mark 13:1-8	We look for patterns and meaning in events	We make the wrong connections, and remain oblivious to other events
58. John 6:1-21	we get hungry and worry about having enough	temptations are to distrust God and take or withhold from others (implied)
60. John 11:32-44	the fact of death and the pain	temptation to lose faith (implied)

	of loss	
62. John 11:32-44	the fact of death and the pain of loss	reacting with despair, doubt, and fear
68. Acts 1:15-26	we experience the pain of betrayal and the fear of being betrayed	we betray others and carry the guilt of betrayal
72. II Corinthians 12:2-10	We are ambivalent about believing in miracles and/or we earnestly desire miracles	our attitudes and/or expectations become stumbling blocks to faith (implied)
74. II Corinthians 12:2-10	weakness	We try to hide our weakness or compensate for it
80. II Timothy 4:6-8	we do not understand death	not understanding makes us worry
81. Hebrews 1:1-4	sometimes we cannot hear God's call	sometimes we are not listening

Any of these sermons could bear more analysis, but taken together, they represent an approach that is surprisingly common – more than one-quarter of the sample – and a strategy that invites more intentional reflection.

The “Human Condition Focus,” with Neutral, Negative, and Positive Statements

A handful of the sermons using the “neutral-negative” strategy can be developed still further. Four of them can be said to have a “Human Condition Focus,” stated neutrally, that is then developed in *both* negative and positive directions. This gives

listeners first a value-neutral statement about humanity, then a negative statement to be confessed and avoided, and a positive picture of redeemed humanity.

Table 7: The "Human Condition Focus" as a Preaching Strategy

<i>Entry in Appendix C, primary text, and "Human Condition Focus" (HCF)</i>	<i>Image of fallen humanity, corresponding to HCF</i>	<i>Image of redeemed humanity, corresponding to HCF</i>	<i>The gospel that enables new possibility</i>
5. Exodus 2:1-10: we feel threatened, and react in different ways	Pharaoh reacts with brutality and murder	Jochabed and Amram react with quiet strength and personal risk	Jesus gives life, and takes away fear; God can be trusted
7. Exodus 16:2-15: we have basic needs	The Israelites complain	We can cry out to God in trust	God chooses to hear not complaint but cries like an infant's
41. Mark 10:17-31: we count what we have, and compare with others	We become unsatisfied, hoard, want more – thus refusing relationship	we can share, and sharing creates relationship	God provides abundantly through relationship
58. John 6:1-21: We get hungry, and worry about having enough	We see others' needs in opposition to our own	We can trust and follow Jesus' lead in sharing with others	God understands our need, cares, and provides for us and others

This more complete pattern gives a well-rounded picture of the human condition: something listeners will recognize in themselves, a call to honesty about humanity at its worst, and a vision of redeemed humanity made possible by God's action. This pattern offers both an articulation of the gospel that is precisely correlated to the human condition and a concrete picture of "grace in the world" like Paul Scott Wilson's "Page Four."

Case Studies – What Did They Hear?

Due to the use of the Revised Common Lectionary by the three participants who collected the materials for the eight complete case studies, I was fortunate to receive two pairs on the same sets of lectionary texts: Case Studies 2 and 3 on John 6:56-69 and Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18, and Case Studies 4 and 5 on Mark 7:24-37 and James 2:1-10, 14-17. Several of the eight allow further analysis of categories mentioned earlier in the chapter: Case Studies 1 and 8 take death as the primary focus of the human condition rather than human sin; Case Studies 2, 4, and 7 are identified above as using the "neutral-negative" strategy; Case Study 7 is identified above as using the "Human Condition Focus" strategy; and Case Study 6 deals with a text that directly addresses the human condition (Psalm 8).

Speaking generally, the most outstanding characteristic of the listeners' responses is the evidence of pre-existing categories into which the listeners fit what they hear. There are several comments that appear extraneous based on the sermon manuscripts, but seem to the listener to be important and germane. They may come from other readings, sermons, connections, or ideas that the listeners bring with them to their act of listening and interpreting what is said. It is always good for preachers to be reminded of the

complexity of communication in general, and specifically, the complexity of the preaching task.

On the whole, however, while using different language and categories, the listeners understood the concept of the human condition and heard what the preacher was trying to communicate. Out of 41 respondents to the eight sermons, there were no clear instances of a complete misunderstanding of the articulation of the human condition, no clear instances of an inability to recognize the human condition proposed, and no instances of strong resistance to it. There were, however, several instances of seeming partial misunderstanding of the sermon's anthropology, or resistance to some of its nuance, subtlety, or complexity.¹⁹ This detail suggests that, while it may not always be possible, a simply-stated human condition focus has a somewhat better chance of being understood and accepted. Most listeners could make some connection, often mentioning situations in their own lives, and many could make a connection to the Bible. Gospel was the most difficult category, and the one where there seemed to be the most evidence of communication breaking down.

Case Studies 2 and 3 were not only based on the same texts, but both took on the topic of the difficulty of discipleship and how easily and often we may walk away from it. There is ample evidence of engagement and acceptance of these aspects of human experience, and many connections were made by listeners to their own lives, signs that these sermons were particularly engaging and effective communication. However, while all respondents found something that struck them as good news, a clear line of reasoning

¹⁹ E.g. Case Study 2:1A, Case Study 4:2E, 3G, 4A; Case Study 8:3B.

correlating a specific articulation of the gospel to this understanding of the human condition was lost on most listeners to these sermons.

Case Studies 4 and 5 both addressed the topic of prejudice in the story of Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman. The difficulty of the topic may account for Case Study 4 having the highest instance of partial misunderstanding or resistance in listeners' responses. Interestingly, both sermons used a literary reference as a point of contact and in both cases several listeners cited that as helpful. Another commonality, though, was that listeners struggled to express a gospel message that they heard in the sermons other than a call to "go and do:" to be better informed or better intentioned, to be quicker to confess or more open to others. This raises a question as to whether a topic like "prejudice" can be chosen for a sermon with the reasonable expectation that any good news in it will not be overshadowed by either a sense of remorse or an impulse to mission.

Listeners also struggled to articulate a gospel message in Case Study 6, a sermon on Psalm 8. Since the Psalm itself has as its topic a prayerful reflection on the human condition *coram Deo*, this sermon comes closest to a simple expository sermon, and that may explain its shortfalls in proclaiming law and gospel. Yet all the listeners heard some good news, even if it was simply to reflect on the line from the Psalm, that God is mindful of us and cares for us (Psalm 8:4).

Case Study 7 shows a more typical law/gospel sermon, with less exploration of the human condition – and probably less challenge for listeners to expand or change what they already know or believe. The gospel was proclaimed with a kind of "refrain," and that seemed to be effective: the key word of the refrain, "relationship," occurs 6 times in

the comments of just three respondents (along with several other references to the idea of relationship without using the word). In this case, the gospel proclamation might have offered a greater insight into human nature than the law: human beings find their truest identity in relationship, to God and to others. Listeners were more able to articulate a clear gospel message in this case than in Case Studies 2-6, suggesting that the “Human Condition Focus” strategy represented by this sermon may be an effective way to preach with some insight into the human condition while also effectively communicating a gospel message.

Case Studies 1 and 8, in dealing with the universal experience of the pain of grief and fear of death, showed great potential for preaching on these topics. Both were very effective in eliciting connections to listeners’ personal experience, stirring new thoughts and questions about personal losses and grief for friends and family members, age (being young and not thinking about death *and* being older and thinking about it a lot), one listener’s own cancer diagnosis, one listener’s care for sick and dying patients, the suicide of acquaintances, the guilt of healthcare staff about treatment choices, and how best to care for grieving friends.²⁰ These two sermons were among the best in connecting with listeners throughout the logical chain of communication all the way through to the gospel. The listeners heard what the preachers were trying to say, heard it as good news, and applied it to their own lives.

²⁰ Appendix E, Case Study 1: 2C, 2D, 2E, 2F, 5E, 5F; Case Study 8: 2A, 2C, 2D, 3A, 5D.

CHAPTER 6

EVALUATION

The Preachers Reflect on Their Experience

Many interesting conclusions about this learning process come from the participants themselves. One preacher shared feelings about the journaling process itself:

I typically do not journal. Historically speaking, journaling has often been a more painful experience for me. So, this was somewhat difficult. That being said I found it helpful and may consider journaling more often in the future, especially since it wasn't like previous experiences.¹

A few preachers found themselves with a new awareness that the human condition might be more than just sin, and that being human can be equated in preaching to potential and other positive characteristics.

Along with this Calvinistic idea of humans being incapable of doing good on our own and in general our condition being a terrible one, I've recognized that there is enormous power in this condition. We are powerful in how cruel we can be, but also the power of God working in us propels [us] to do great, ordinary kindnesses.²

Perhaps misunderstanding certain terms, Preacher F also found that the experience of intentional reflection and journaling opened up another side to human nature in preaching:

It has changed my thinking theologically because it is often easier to focus on the negative (human condition) and less on the positive (theological anthropology). I've learned to focus more on the positive (not that I brush over or ignore the

¹ Appendix D: Preacher F.

² Appendix D: Preacher J.

negative) than I probably did in the past. I would like to think this has led to emphasizing God's grace, the good news, more in my sermons. The human condition doesn't have final word.

The preachers split nearly evenly regarding whether a direct statement of the human condition was most effective, or more of an indirect, implied route. Several suggested that both might be necessary at different times: "Implied communication is probably safer preaching. But from time to time one needs to hear: I've messed up. Badly. And God loves me anyway."³

One reflection mirrored some of this thesis's ambivalence about established theology being an essential tool for preaching and yet at times the greatest barrier to fresh encounters with Scripture and lived human reality:

It seems the more time I spend with other humans and away from the books they write, the clearer my sense is of this human condition. Yet, the writings of theologians, pastors, saints of the church, give me a language in which to understand what I think my heart knows pretty well: if there's a way for us to mess up, we humans will figure it out. And yet, God chooses to be in relationship with us.⁴

Several preachers found themselves turning to story – to narrative – to demonstrate the human condition with concreteness and to win listeners' acceptance. "I most often imply the human condition, inviting others to make the connection through stories/examples in our life together."⁵ "I almost always tended to state the human condition directly either as a statement or through a story."⁶ Another could not help but

³ Appendix D: Preacher J.

⁴ Appendix D: Preacher J.

⁵ Appendix D: Preacher B.

⁶ Appendix D: Preacher D.

include a parabolic flourish – a narrative –in a thoughtful analysis of the character of narrative communication, including the preacher’s own:

I realized through this process that I almost always introduce anthropological considerations through story. Why? I suppose it is because I truly believe first-order discourse more accurately describes the human condition than the second-order’s more direct approach. My condition, our reality, belies analytical descriptors, but are better captured (and paradoxically, set free to be of use to others) in story. To wit, Old Lady Wobblestone didn’t die a month after her husband because of a Takotsubo cardiomyopathy, though that may have been what the coroner wrote. She died of a broken heart. I think that this approach, as unconscious to me as it has been to this point, shaped my theological reflection in that through the stories shared with me, I have been hearing themes under which our common experience is described: love, loss, fear, joy, hate, sorrow, etc.⁷

One preacher put this all together, connecting a commitment to reflection and concreteness in describing the human condition with the corresponding imperative to preach the gospel as a response that is equally reflective and concrete, summarizing the task of correlating the gospel to the human condition:

I was surprised at two things: how easy it was (most weeks) to find an articulation of the human condition either within the text itself or arising from an engagement with the text; and how diversely this tension is manifested in our lives. One of the things I learned from this exercise is that talking about the human condition is a way into talking about sin in concrete terms. Another thing that I learned is that the wide variety of expressions of the human condition demands a wide and diverse expression of the gospel. By being forced to ask what is the human condition that is being explored in this text or in this sermon, I was also forced to answer the question what does salvation look like in this case? What does it mean to be rescued/redeemed/saved from this particular manifestation of sin in my life? And how is God accomplishing that?... I think this process has, more than anything, given me a better appreciation for the need to be concrete in my articulation of the gospel. Blanket statements about God’s love, or the atoning nature of Jesus’ death only go so far in response to particular expressions of sin/the human condition.⁸

⁷ Appendix D: Preacher G.

⁸ Appendix D: Preacher D.

Evaluating the Research Process

Some of the strengths of this research project were the size of the group of preachers and congregations participating, the diversity of the participants, and the abundance of material generated. Representing six denominations, have received training through nine different seminaries, and preaching all across the United States and Canada, they offered diversity beyond that which I had felt would be possible for this size of project. That, between them, they took the time to produce 91 sermon entries, 11 initial/final entry pairs, and 8 complete case studies, without any promise of incentive or benefit apart from what they may learn from the process testifies not only to the generous character of the participants but also to their dedication to improving their preaching. It is a fortuitous circumstance for those who would study preaching that there are many preachers willing and interested in participating in the hope of, and for the sake of, better preaching.

Another strength that I have come to appreciate is the importance of open-ended prompts. There is risk in leaving questions open-ended, in that answers may not fit the researcher's expectations, or they may not be as directly comparable with others' responses as they might have been with more direction. There is further risk in laying out several questions, and letting the respondents choose which to answer. I have found these risks to be worth taking. Several interesting insights came from respondents taking an open-ended question in a direction I had not intended. In many more instances, the respondents told me as much by which prompts they chose to respond to as they did by what they wrote. Speaking very practically, I suspect I got more data and better quality

data by allowing the respondents to choose the prompts they were most interested in, and not trying to make them feel obligated to answer them all.

I also found the simple listener feedback forms to be quite adequate. There was enough structure to be able to trace the thoughts of the listener through their understanding of the human condition – relating it to their own experiences, and to the Scriptures – and on to its correlation with the gospel. Yet there was not so much structure as to cause frustration for the respondent who did not understand the categories presumed by the survey, or to limit the voluntary additions and free-associations that listeners shared, making this data much the richer.

There were some complications to the process in that I, the researcher, was also a participant: journaling about my preaching even as prepared the thesis, and collecting listener feedback in the congregation I serve. A less obvious but equally important complication was my regular interaction with several of the other participants: some were classmates, and others colleagues with whom I study the texts for preaching each week. My thesis work was bound to be part of our discussions of pastoral ministry and preaching. I decided early on to embrace these seeming complications. In my own journaling, I experimented with categories I was developing for the thesis. When I read something I found to be very practical, or formed a tentative new idea of my own, I shared it openly with the other preachers, in the hope that it might stimulate further reflection in their journaling, and further refinement for my tentative ideas. While there remained the complication of coding one's own work, on the whole, my participation in the project and regular contact with the journaling preachers over several months was of great benefit.

Avenues for Further Study

This abundance of thoughtful data itself invites further study. Much more could be done with just the material gathered in appendices to this thesis. Beyond that, several directions are suggested by what I have found.

The question of strategy – how the preacher intends to present the human condition and persuade the listeners of it – turned out to be an especially fruitful one. Ties to communication theory and rhetoric could not be sufficiently explored within the confines of this thesis. The listener responses that were the core of the case studies began to explore the effectiveness of the communication strategy, but that is an area that could bear more in-depth study.

I had initially hoped to explore more fully the process by which the sermon, and particularly the articulation of the human condition that the preacher commits to, arises from the text being proclaimed. I identified several patterns by which this can happen whether that be quite directly (in those rather rare cases where there is a direct statement about humanity in the text), or through an empathetic reading of a narrative, or through a more complex process of interaction between the text and the preacher or preaching context (or whether it is the case that the foundational understanding of the human condition in a given sermon did not actually arise from the text in any meaningful way). I still think this is an important question, and the preachers' journals offer many insights into this process. However, it was difficult to give more definition to the different patterns, and difficult to differentiate between the categories without a sermon manuscript. There may be potential for more study regarding that move from text to sermon.

Something that came to be more and more interesting and important in my thinking throughout this process was question of if, and to what extent, our preaching actually reflects our theological commitments. We may say one thing, but, without realizing it, preach another. This may be especially true of the human condition, which, for most preachers, is either an intuitive assumption or an unconsciously accepted confessional doctrine (or some mix of both). There is some reflection on this topic in this thesis and in the data collected for it, but a fascinating avenue for further study would be whether, and to what extent, a preacher's stated understanding of the human condition can be seen in her or his preaching, whether perhaps the preaching undermines the professed position or dilutes it with other assumptions, and whether focused reflection on the human condition might bring theology and practice into closer alignment (by movement in practice, movement in professed belief, or some of both).

This thesis has proposed some tentative categories for strategies – sometimes intentional on the part of the preacher, and sometimes just observed – in preaching reflectively on the human condition. Particularly a constellation of three related categories highlighted in Chapter 5 could use more study and refinement: the positive approach, the “neutral-negative” approach, and the “Human Condition Focus” approach. What does it sound like to spend a sermon exploring redeemed humanity? How do listeners receive and come to understand such preaching, and what are the pitfalls and promises of such preaching? The “neutral-negative” approach arose largely among preachers seeking to allow listeners to let down their defenses. Does that work? Under what conditions does it work, and when does it not? Can the “Human Condition Focus” approach be more widely applied? Do the theological foundations for such an approach,

some of which are proposed in this thesis, function in practice? If so, do they function well generally, or only with certain texts or in certain contexts?

Conclusions

These data offer several emerging themes regarding when and how to preach on the human condition. It is telling that case studies 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 had several characteristics in common. In dealing with human resistance to the difficulties of discipleship (2 and 3), human prejudice (4 and 5), and humanity's place in the universe (6), they took on complex topics and analyzed them at some length. While all five manuscripts clearly show a move to gospel proclamation, the listeners' thoughts seem to remain on their insights into the human condition, and the gospel messages that the preachers intended are not necessarily those mentioned by the listeners. In these commonalities there is a caution for preachers, as well as a possible way forward. The caution is that the presentation of the human condition can be overdone: whether it is social or psychological analysis, autobiographical illustration, or poetic rumination, the emphasis of the sermon will likely rest there, even if good news is proclaimed as well. These sermons were not completely out-of-balance, but the listeners' feedback suggests that the persuasive and thorough presentation of the human condition got their attention, and tended to keep it. The possible way forward is simply to be aware of this dynamic. It may be necessary to preach this type of sermon sometimes, and indeed, the listeners' feedback forms showed great benefit as respondents were led to think more deeply about the human condition and relate biblical truths to their own life in powerful ways. Their own reflections suggest that they enjoyed and appreciated the chance to grow in their ethical awareness and self-understanding. An awareness of the dynamics of this type of

preaching, though, will help the preacher to be sure in many other sermons the gospel message will be allowed to bear the accent.

Working through the sermon entries, another pattern emerged. Though they are arranged anonymously and in canonical order in Appendix C, the reader may notice that several struggle on a regular basis with the preaching of law and gospel as their standard for faithfulness, while others, perhaps those from outside the direct lineage of the Reformation traditions, do not have that struggle. Speaking very generally, certain trends present themselves. On the one hand, those preachers in the Reformation law/gospel tradition bring a depth of reflection to all their preaching, they seem to try to bring the witness of Scripture as a whole to bear on individual pericopes, and they ensure that the good news of Jesus Christ was, in some form, present in every sermon they preached. On the other hand, in comparison to the other preachers, those with a commitment to the law/gospel dialectic spoke of struggle in their preparation, tended to add a lot of nuance and some equivocation to their preaching, attempted more difficult arguments, and ran the danger of preaching sermons that were simply overwrought and too complex to be communicated well, even to people of good intention and formidable attention spans.

It is my hope that the idea of the “Human Condition Focus,” which begins with a simple and morally neutral statement of some aspect of the human condition and then explores it in both positive and negative directions, might benefit preachers of all types. Those who do not come from law/gospel traditions can use it to take the best of that tradition and perhaps add theological depth and completeness to practical sermons. Those who aspire to preach law and gospel in every preaching event might use this technique to take on the human condition in portions small enough to manage in a single sermon, and

to preach on more basic and practical topics than those to which they might otherwise tend. In addition to the topics explored in Table 7 above – the experience of need, threat, having enough, hunger – here is a proposal for some other basic human experiences that might be explored as a “Human Condition Focus:”

Table 8: Examples of the "Human Condition Focus" as a Tool for Preaching

<i>“Human Condition Focus”</i>	<i>Human Condition Lived Out as Sin</i>	<i>Vision of Redeemed Humanity</i>
shame	hiding	self-acceptance
guilt	self-justification	confession and peace
suffering, disappointment	bitterness, self-pity	endurance (through lament)
anxiety	irrational fear	confidence in God
being wronged by others	retaliation	forgiveness and peace
pain of loss	numbing, avoidance	grieving in hope
encountering difference	division of “us” and “them”	openness to relationship
limitation	resentment	dependence on God
seeing others’ needs	excuses, looking away	offering help

It is important to remember that, in every case, the vision of redeemed humanity is not the gospel in itself; rather it is a picture of human life lived in faith that is enabled by the gospel of God’s action through Jesus Christ. Also, any of these scenarios could be played out differently, and *must* be played out concretely, depending on the promptings of the specific texts being preached and the context for the sermon.

CHAPTER 7

REFLECTION

It was never the goal of this thesis to convince preachers to put aside non-biblical methods of exploring human nature and experience. Far from it – not to engage with culture and science would be a tragic missed opportunity, not to mention a disastrous misreading of our post-Enlightenment context. These others sources, in fact, become lively conversation partners with Scripture. Yet there is a danger in drawing *only* on sources produced by our culture: that we may enter into a circle of endlessly confirming our assumptions, and never experience the newness that an outside perspective can give. In our modern context, the Bible can be that independent voice we need. It has the power to change the way we see ourselves and others when we hear it on its own terms: freed, as best it can be, from centuries of accretions, and freed, as best we are able, from the limitations of our own assumptions and defensiveness toward it.

A deeper engagement with biblical anthropology at the very least provides a helpful corrective for the preacher. Does your preaching honor the body, and avoid talking of the soul as a separable entity? Is there room for lament in your preaching: a place for the sufferer in the presence of God, especially an innocent sufferer? Is human nature presented in your preaching in such a way that it allows for Jesus to be proclaimed as truly human without contradiction? Is the created goodness of human life affirmed, and is attention given to the reality of humanity redeemed in Christ? Is death spoken of primarily as an enemy of God and against God's intention for the world (and not, for

instance, as a vehicle for the soul's escape from bodily existence)? Are human life and the fullness of life described primarily in terms of relationships? Are human beings numbered among God's creatures in a way that distinguishes them from other living beings yet does not suggest that our creatureliness is in itself a cause for shame? The answers to these questions may very well have some nuance, but biblically, the answer to all of them is "yes." These and other such questions can help preachers critically evaluate their preaching, and lead them into further Bible study in areas where greater depth of understanding is needed. This is essential in almost any definition of *faithful* preaching.

Yet preachers must also commit to *effective* preaching: taking listeners seriously, using all the tools of communication to lay the foundation for the gospel, and then delivering it. Biblical anthropology may seem to be an impediment to many listeners, but my hope in this thesis was to bring to light all the ways the great variety of scriptural sources and some representative methods, both old and new, might enrich and enable the communication necessary for effective preaching.

One of the gifts the Bible and a critical appropriation of the tradition have to offer is to empower the preacher to explore the diversity of the human condition – and for preachers, this is an essential task. Preaching true statements about the human condition can, over time, become heresy by creating an impression that the truth of humanity is that simple, or that certain truths are true without speaking other truths that are equally true. This is the experience many of us have had in the presence of consistent, doctrinally pure preaching in a certain tradition: every word is faithful to the confessional schema, but only one schema is ever put forward. W. Paul Jones' concept of "theological Worlds" certainly emphasizes the need for proclamation that is intentionally diverse in

perspective, but one need not accept his claims entirely to see the need to come at the human experience from various directions. Perhaps preachers can best think of preaching as a dialogue unfolding over time: no one sermon can do justice to the human condition, certainly, but a picture can come together across many sermons that has the diversity and complexity to be considered a true and faithful rendering of theological anthropology.

As some of the journaling preachers observed, together with Herman Stuempfle, when the human condition is being preached as a proclamation of law, some restraint is in order. People may quibble with the term “sin,” but they have a profound sense of brokenness, however they may conceive of it,¹ within themselves and in the world, and the goal of preaching is not to wallow in it. It needs to be articulated “not as an end in itself but [only] in order to serve the proclamation of the gospel.”²

By contrast to that thoughtful and intentionally limited use of the law, there simply cannot be enough theological anthropology, broadly understood, in sermons. The contemplation of human life *coram Deo* need not be co-extensive with the preaching of the law! It can take the form in sermons that it does in the Psalms, bringing all experiences – good and bad, exceptional and mundane, morally negative, positive, and indifferent – into the context of life with God, often through direct address of God in the language of prayer. In Christian proclamation, it should be a foregone conclusion that the sentence that begins, “who are human beings?” should end in a direct address to God: “that *you* are mindful of them?”³

¹ Appendix D: Preacher G.

² Stuempfle, *Preaching Law and Gospel*, 31.

³ Psalms 8 and 144, discussed in Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, 13.

As a preacher in the tradition of law and gospel, I have long been aware that, in order to preach the gospel – which is our primary mission – something else must come first. What I have now realized is that, in the post-Enlightenment world, there are now in fact *two* things that must come first. In addition to the preaching of the law which reveals something wrong that must be acknowledged before it can be addressed, listeners must also be convinced again and again in preaching that the place to tell the truth about what is wrong and seek its resolution is before God, *coram Deo*. While post-Enlightenment Christian preaching has honed its proclamation of the human condition as law sometimes even to the satisfaction of the world outside the church as social analysis or moral philosophy or psychology, what has not gotten the attention, to the great detriment of the effectiveness of preaching, has been theological anthropology. Theological anthropology in preaching is, first, the insistence that the deepest reality of human truth is worked out in relationship to God, and second, the modeling of the dynamics of that process and that relationship for listeners to experience.

Much attention has been given in this thesis to the Bible's witness to the fundamental unity of the human person, over against dichotomous or trichotomous separable views. This may seem overly philosophical for a study of preaching, or even esoteric. Let me enumerate the reasons I have come to find this basic biblical insight to be so essential for faithful and innovative biblical preaching. First, the understanding of humanity as fully embodied makes available to the reader much of the Bible's rich reflection. Even in the standard, poor translations of the biblical terms for different aspects of humankind, some references, such as those that mention a limb or organ as a representation of certain aspects of a person, are obscure without this understanding. In

better translations, and in the Hebrew text itself, the reader is confronted by many references to mouth, bones, heart, kidneys, etc., and would be utterly confused without some sense for how those terms function in the Old Testament thought-world. Second, the full integration of body and soul anchors human nature in the act of God's creation and (literally) grounds human existence in a shared history and destiny with the earth. Human origins were not elsewhere than here on earth, and human destiny is not elsewhere, either. Third, the unified anthropology of the Old Testament becomes a helpful corrective in the construction of Christian theology. The Old Testament deserves our attention, as Gustav Wingren says, since it provides the anthropological underpinnings for the whole of Scripture. We have to remember that its perspective is assumed in the New Testament, or we are in danger of filling in other assumptions of our own.⁴ Fourth, this biblical understanding of the human person is the basis for the core doctrines of soteriology and Christology. The fact that dualist misunderstandings of anthropology underlie the major early heresies of Arianism and Pelagianism (as well as the earlier heresies of Docetism and Gnosticism not discussed in this thesis) ought to give the Christian preacher ample reason to dedicate some attention to the matter. Fifth, the distinctive core message of Christianity is the resurrection, a doctrine often misunderstood or simply avoided in large part because of misunderstandings about the relationship of soul and body. Yet the resurrection message can be authorized and invigorated by clarity about biblical anthropology. Finally, in contemporary America, where many congregations have only a vague sense for how their service ministries and social action relate to their ministry of evangelism, and where American so-called

⁴ Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 16-17.

“evangelical” movements have distorted the shape of the church and gospel in their efforts to “save *souls*,” might the church’s confusion about its mission be rooted in some basic confusion about the nature of the *integrated human beings* it is God’s mission to save? A preacher with clarity about biblical anthropology could do much good in calling Christians into the holistic mission of God.

Preaching that addresses the human condition must give attention to story: human stories. Certainly, then, preaching based on our astounding biblical canon of narrative theology must consider doubly how story makes theological meaning. Luther transcended the potential limitations of his paradoxical anthropology by giving it narrative shape in the lives of his hearers and the world they knew. Law and gospel preaching must always be carried by a certain narrative logic as one thing leads to another, not as in a formula, but as in a story. Paul Scott Wilson calls on preachers to *depict* their truths of trouble and grace rather than propose them, so that people will recognize themselves in the Scripture, and the truth of Scripture in their lives. Walter Brueggemann says that it is only with the particularity of narrative that we move with people in preaching: like the Israelites, from denial and despair through the experience of exile to the wonder of restoration; and like Jesus’ disciples, from Friday vulnerability through Saturday dread absence to Sunday surprise.⁵

Preachers would do well to recognize that our heritage of narrative theology is their greatest obstacle and their greatest help. On the one hand, narrative is not what people expect from Scripture. It has been observed that people of other faiths are shocked

⁵ These terms were used by Brueggemann in his lectures to the Festival of Homiletics in Nashville Tennessee, May 2007.

to read the Bible; expecting oracles of God, they encounter stories strange and mundane.⁶ Indeed, many Christians feel that same disorientation when confronted with their own Scriptures! How stories create and present theological meaning will need to be explored in preaching so that listeners can learn to approach Bible stories as disciples and theologians. On the other hand, everyone loves a good story. There is something innate within humanity that thrills with recognition at the presentation of compelling narrative. If preachers can lead the people past their cognitive barriers to narrative theology, they may find their listeners delighting to explore the contours of the biblical very-human-yet-divine story together.

Beyond attention to the genre of narrative, there are some key texts that every preacher should revisit from time to time in establishing a biblical anthropology for preaching. The whole book of Genesis is useful, but especially the first chapters, with special attention on the second. The wisdom literature is an important component, especially the voices that dissent from or nuance the dominant voice of Proverbs: Ecclesiastes, Job, and the Song of Songs. Texts like the latter part of Romans 5 are helpful for laying out a Christian anthropology, but it is the latter part of Romans 7 that gives that anthropology the psychological realism needed in our time. If I had to choose one biblical resource to renew the church's anthropology, I would recommend the reading, studying, and praying of the Psalms.

A simple insight that has arisen for me out of this study is the need for Christian preachers to preach about death: not just at funerals, but on a regular basis. Death is as fundamental a part of the human predicament as sin. If we do not have anything to say

⁶ Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 234-235.

about death to the disciples in the pews, then we preachers need to return to the Scriptures and find the richness that is there, both in reflecting on life and death, and on proclaiming resurrection. Perhaps preachers just need to commit to doing this preaching, and they may find that, with Scripture's authorization, they do have something to say.

A constructive theological proposal has arisen for me as well. Again and again, I see the constellation of thoughts and actions that constitute sin as different manifestations of a defensive mechanism on the part of human beings against acknowledging their own finitude, limitation, vulnerability, and resulting dependence on God. What is sin but denial of vulnerability, avoidance of vulnerability, defiance of vulnerability, anger, despair, or anxiety in the face of vulnerability? These are the roots of sin. Picking up from Wolfhart Pannenberg's exploration of finitude and the infinite, to be human is to be aware of the infinite, and thus painfully aware of one's own finitude - finitude, that is, with regard to one's own autonomous power. This presents a different understanding of what it means for God to overcome sin. What if overcoming sin is not a defeat of the human condition, but a changed situation that allows humanity to embrace the human condition, peacefully, and in trust toward God? Then we can come to understand faith as being "comfortable in our own skin," an acceptance of our vulnerability, limitation, and finitude because we can depend (that is, we are dependent) on a God whom we know, and who loves us. We know God's love by this – the full revelation of God in the human being, Jesus Christ, who did not sin, but who fully embraced our finitude, limitation and vulnerability. It is because he fully entered the concrete realities of the human condition that preachers can enter them, too – and expect to find him there.

APPENDIX A

PREACHER'S JOURNAL (PROMPTS)

Please use this document as your journal, and return it to me as an attachment when it is complete. Each journal needs only one initial and one final entry, but please include as many sermon entries as you like. The prompts are there to help you – there is no need to respond to them all. Thank you for your participation!

INITIAL ENTRY. Reflect on your current thinking about the human condition and theological anthropology. Is this something you think about? Can you summarize your approach in one sentence or phrase? Reflect on your influences. Is there a particular theologian's approach, a confessional position, a certain book of the Bible, a discipline outside theology, or the work of a certain artist or writer, or some other influence which shapes your thinking? How do your commitments shape your approach to the preaching task?

SERMON ENTRY.

Preaching date:

Text(s):

(May be written during the preparation process or reflecting on the process and completed sermon.)

- 1. What articulation of the human condition or theological anthropology has emerged from your preaching preparation? How did it arise – from a close reading of text itself, or in the process of engaging with the text and interpreting it? Do you find this understanding of the human condition to be essentially in continuity with what you already believed? Is there something fresh or novel about it?*
- 2. How will this understanding shape the sermon? How will this understanding affect the way the good news is proclaimed? Will the understanding of the human condition be stated or implied? Does it resonate with your experience? Will you assume that all or most listeners will accept it as true, or do you plan to try to persuade them of it?*

FINAL ENTRY. Reflect on this process of reflective preaching: anything that has changed for you during this time of study, or anything you have learned.

What approaches did you tend to use: Stating the foundational understanding of the human condition directly, or leaving it implied? Working from understandings that you expect listeners to accept, or working from understandings that require explanation and/or persuasion? How has this process shaped your thinking theologically? How has it shaped your preaching of the good news?

APPENDIX B

SERMON LISTENER FEEDBACK SURVEY (SAMPLE)

Implied Consent Letter for Survey

April 1, 2015

Dear Listener to Sermons,

You are invited to participate in a study of different ways of understanding and stating the human condition, especially as it shapes Christian preaching. I hope to learn how to make preaching more effective by connecting the biblical text with human experience. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because one of your congregation's preachers is participating with me in a time of Bible study and reflection on the process of preaching.

If you decide to participate, please complete the enclosed survey. Your return of this survey is implied consent. The survey is designed to allow you to react to a sermon you heard and offer feedback. It will take about 10 minutes. No benefits accrue to you for answering the survey, but your responses will be used to give helpful feedback to your own preacher and to any other preachers who read the resulting study. Any discomfort or inconvenience to you derives only from the amount of time taken to complete the survey.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed. Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relationships with Luther Seminary. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

Completing and turning in this form constitutes consent to allow use of your direct quotations in the published thesis document.

If you have any questions at any time, please contact me:

Rev. Paul Miller
[email and phone number]
Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Paul Miller

SERMON LISTENER FEEDBACK SURVEY

Congregation Name:
Date:
Sermon Text(s):

1. What do you think was this sermon's understanding of *the human condition*: the truth about human nature, or the predicament we all find ourselves in? (Please feel free to use your own words, or the preacher's words as you remember them.)

2. Was that description of the human condition something you could relate to? How strongly did it resonate with you? Where does it connect with your own life and experiences?
3. Is there anything you can remember in today's reading(s) from the Bible that connects to this understanding of the human condition?
4. What in this sermon sounded like good news to you? (Feel free to state it in your own words.)
5. What did this sermon change for you, or how did it make you feel? What questions does it raise?

APPENDIX C

PREACHERS' SERMON ENTRIES

Genesis 1-2; *see* Psalm 8

Genesis 1:26-28; *see* Genesis 11:1-9

Genesis 2:18-24; *see* Mark 10:2-16

1. Genesis 2:18-3:21

Preaching date: July 12, 2015

A strong sense of shame and remorse surfaced repeatedly while preparing, especially after reading the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. To experience and feel no shame would be incredible, and was God's original intent. Obviously, this was based on a close reading of the text. I decided to preach this text as a first-person narrative as a part of my research project and broke down while studying one day and just wept. I found myself saying, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." To some degree it is continuity with what I already believed. However, this was different. Verbally expressing the remorse I felt by saying, "I'm sorry" had something to do with it. I've often wanted to blame Adam and Eve for their choice. In doing so was actually transferring my own guilt onto them without realizing it, very much like what happened in the garden with everyone passing the buck. We struggle with taking responsibility for our own actions and sin.

These realizations certainly impacted the shape of the sermon. As Eve, I apologized. I apologized for what I did, for the impact it had on my children, grandchildren, and other people. I took responsibility for my choice, asked for forgiveness, and received mercy and grace. People actually had tears in their eyes when that happened. This led me to believe they understood the nature of the human condition and that as image-bearers we need to take responsibility and see God's reflection in others as well. I believe they accepted it without too much persuasion. That one may be tougher to evaluate given this was as offered as Eve.

2. Genesis 11:1-9; Genesis 1:26-28; Acts 17:22-28

Preaching date: August 16, 2015

Servant Leadership amidst Religious Diversity

I go into preparation with openness to the research and (assigned) readings for the World Religions class. Since it has been 8-9 years since I have taken a course in the same topic, there is much to read/review prior to now actually teaching the subject. Of course, I selected the weekly course readings, but I did so only by surfing through the various and sundry options in my fairly extensive library. I don't actually read the texts until the week prior to teaching the particular theme. This week is the final week for the course, so the final course topic which is "servant leadership in a religiously diverse world." (I did not preach Aug. 9th as it was VBS/children's Sunday so the world religions theme of the week—Islam—was skipped. I will preach on that theme next week for the church's finale session on world religions.) I was struck by the pastoral presence of both authors for the assigned readings (Rabbi Brad Hirschfield; UMC pastor S. Wesley Ariarajah). The themes that emerged revolve around unity vs. uniformity. It is more important that all people are exactly uniform/the same; or is it more important that we have unity amidst our diversity? The text that came to mind is the story of Babel; the creation narrative; and Gospels and letters which remind us that Christ died for all that all might have life. Overall, the authors and Biblical texts address the fears and insecurities of humans—"if you don't believe exactly the way I believe then maybe my beliefs are wrong (but they can't be wrong so yours must be wrong)."

What are we afraid of? Who in our life makes us feel threatened because they hold beliefs different than our own? (Including views related to politics, sexual orientation, marital status, vocational calling, parenting style, etc.) I will give include Ariarajah's five common reasons Christians hesitate to participate in interfaith worship and/or dialogue (theological, biblical, liturgical, cultural, psychological) and his five variations of interfaith worship and how these models reflect how one might feel threatened by difference in our lives (mere presence during an interfaith worship seen as compromising one's own faith; use of rituals ok as long as worshipers don't know they come from another faith tradition; respecting prayers of different traditions within one service; using prayers that are inclusive of all faith traditions of all those gathered; producing new texts, prayers, etc. which are inclusive and non-offensive of all religious traditions participating together). I also will include Rabbi Hirschfield's the seven-step rabbinic example for working through difference. Take home: how (if) we feel threatened if we would participate in interfaith worship and/or dialogue and why/if we don't. What is at stake in our faith if we don't object to interfaith worship/dialogue?

Shortly before preaching—reality check—way too much material for one sermon. Cut big chunks from Rabbi Hirschfield's info/saved for another time.

3. Genesis 12:1-9

Preaching date: June 28, 2015

Pride is the theme of the human condition or theological anthropology. I am teaching World Religions for a summer series and I've opted to also use the material for a summer sermon series. The introductory course/week includes the postmodern hermeneutic and its role in servant leadership in a religiously diverse world. The root issue is who owns so-called "truth/Truth" and who gets to decide who is "in" and who is "out" of TRUTH and therefore who can claim "ownership" of God.

Alongside World Religions I also am teaching Survey of the Old Testament. In preparation for teaching from Genesis/Exodus I was reminded that the story of creation was God creating a place to be in relationship with humans. Of course when Adam & Eve were evicted from the garden they were evicted from God's presence—that is the punishment; separation from God. The call of Abram begins the reconstruction process to restore the broken relationship between humans and the Creator. The Exodus event culminates in the last chapter with the tabernacle and ark being completed and God's presence once again moving amid God's people. It is a powerful image of God's desire to be present in our lives—really present and not abstract.

Genesis 12:3b is the standout verse: "...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." We like to think of this as physical blessing—like Abraham is a lord bestowing gifts to the lowly people around him. In fact, the blessing is the presence of YHWH. That other people are to receive the blessing is the reminder that people of faith are called to be a blessing and to share the love of God/YHWH in tangible ways to the broken and hurting world. A surprising response that came out of the sermon—evident in the prayer of response led by a lay leader following the message—is the reminder that people of difference also have many, many similarities. We are reminded to look for the commonalities instead of focusing on the differences. There is more grace when we realize how much we actually have in common with people who might otherwise be very different from us. At the heart of the matter, humanity is the same (Maslow's hierarchy comes to mind – physiological needs, safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, self-actualization).

4. Genesis 18:1-15

Preaching date: September 20, 2015

God will make a way. We have all heard the promises that God will make a way or look after God's children. However, many times we really are not sure. Sometimes we wait on the God to fulfill God's promises, but we begin to wonder. Will God really find a way. Abraham and Sarah tried to take things into their own hands and it did not really work the way they had planned. Ishmael became a distraction to Sarah and she reminded her what she did not have. We all have disappointment in our lives and sometimes God answers in unexpected ways. The fresh aspect of this human understanding, is a reaffirmation that God does not always provide in ways we think he should. Sarah in her old age was going to have a baby.

This understanding shaped the sermon by becoming its focus. The sermon began with a story for the TV show *The West Wing* (on Canadian Netflix). The story is about a man who walked down the street and fell down a hole. Many tried to help him out, but they couldn't. Then his friend came by and he called for help. The friend jumped down the hole and the original person asked him why he did that, because now both were stuck. The friend replied, 'I have been here before and I know the way out.' God stooped down in Jesus Christ His Son. God knows the way out and He wants to show us the way. It is my assumption that the listeners will accept this a true and it will reaffirm previous beliefs.

5. Exodus 2:1-10

Preaching date: July 19, 2015

When we feel threatened, we react in different ways. When Pharaoh was threatened, he chose to take the lives of those by whom he felt threatened. Yet there were some (Jochebed and Amram) who didn't cave to that fear. They were brave and stood up to the intimidation and abuse of power. They were strong and received their strength from a source outside of themselves. This rose from a close reading of the text. There isn't much of anything fresh or novel about it and it affirmed what I already believed. Our sinful nature and theological anthropology are both quite evident in this passage.

I hope to explore the role fear plays in our lives and how we respond to it – we can either respond with a knee-jerk reaction like Pharaoh or with a quiet strength that comes from an outside source and seek to give life instead of take it. The good news will be emphasized as a life-giving gift in a basket. With quiet strength, Jochebed and Amram trusted Moses to God's care and put him in a basket (ark) into the Nile. With quiet strength, Jesus gave us life. My understanding of the human condition will be stated emphatically and resonates with my experience. I think most of my listeners will accept that it's true. However, I do plan on persuading them to respond by giving back financially, as well as something that's life-giving in nature.

Exodus 3:1-14; see Deuteronomy 6:4-8

6. Exodus 3:1-15

Preaching date: October 4, 2015

The human condition that will be focused on is the condition of oppression. Throughout human history there has also been a history of domination and intimidation of one society or group over against another. This arose within the scripture passage itself and with the daily news reports of the refugee crises in Syria and Northern Africa. The sermon looks to God as the ultimate solution to this crisis, by God's response in love. While looking to the text, we see that God's response most often involves God's followers. In the text God says that he will respond to the people of Israel and right after God's statement he says to Moses in verse ten, so now Go! God is calling God's people to involve themselves in God's response to the situations of crises that surround us.

The sermon will be shaped by what God is doing in the world and what God will do through us. There is a historical Salvation Army story of the Founder of the Army speaking to his son after passing many men sleeping under the bridges of London. He ask if his son knew that this was happening. The son replies that he did. The Founders response to his son is the statement, "Do Something." This story has become the foundation of much of the social services in the Salvation Army. This understanding of the human condition will be shared by many in the congregation and is used as a call to become involved.

7. Exodus 16:2-15

Preaching date: August 2, 2015

The human condition focus of this sermon is on complaining. This arose from the persistent complaining of the Israelites in the wilderness. I think everyone can relate to complaining – hearing others' complaints – justified or not – feeling needs and worries that might lead to complaining, struggling with whether or not to voice our complaints, and knowing our own tendencies, whether that be to whine or to get sarcastic or to suffer silently or to get resentful, etc.

What was new to me because of deeper reflection was to acknowledge two truths: one, that complaining is a real problem and a manifestation of human fallenness, a temptation and something that can distort our personalities and eat away at who God made us to be... and two, that complaining, or at least the roots of complaining in anxiety about having our needs met, is just a part of being human, limited, and dependent, and so it will always be with us in this life and so should not be judged harshly.

The good news, then, is to be found in how God responded to the Israelites' complaining and how God responds to our complaining and underlying worry: by taking our needs seriously and meeting them. Exodus 16:12 was a key verse: "then you will know that I am the LORD your God." God chooses to hear their complaining as prayer, and chooses to respond by meeting their need. The image I am using is the cries of an infant. No one (one would hope) hears the cries of a beloved infant and says, "hey, quit complaining." Instead, we acknowledge that the infant is truly dependent on us and has an unmet need, and so we respond by caring. So God hears us and responds to us. We sometimes compassionately label others' bad behavior as "a cry for help," and this sermon takes that assessment seriously.

I think the issue of complaining will be close-to-home for the listeners, both the dangers of complaining leading to ungratefulness and self-pity, and the simple truth that we all have complaints, spoken or unspoken, that spring from the needs and worries of our hearts. People may not immediately accept how dangerous complaining may be, but I don't think they will be hard to convince if they bring to mind extreme cases of people who have destroyed friendships, marriages, or churches, for instance, by complaining. The experience with a crying infant, and the feelings of compassion (and exasperation) that go with it will be familiar to many or all listeners.

I find it very appropriate and comforting to think of God hearing our complaints in this way, and it gives me a sense of peace about my core anxieties. That is what I hope for my listeners.

Exodus 20:1-17 and 23:1-3; see Deuteronomy 6:4-8

8. Numbers 11, James 5:13-20

Preaching date: September 27, 2015

The human condition to proclaim this week is positive – humanity redeemed can be useful to God. The most engaging part of the text is the upset caused by “unauthorized prophecy” in the camp, Joshua’s wish that they be stopped, and Moses’ wish that all God’s people would be prophets. Most of what God has done has been through people – it’s still God’s doing, but people – even and especially regular people, like the 70, like the elders mentioned in James – are useful to God, and are agents with God in this work.

The sermon is an invitation to consider how God is at work around us, and how we might be useful. I will begin with an invitation to consider what many people should already know: that any Christian can baptize in an emergency, hear confession and proclaim forgiveness, or offer to pray with/for someone. That should get them thinking. This matches up perfectly with the life of the congregation – we are commissioning some trained lay ministers this week. I think people will accept this, that God works through pastors and lay people in various ways, and that it is God at work in them all.

9. Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Preaching date: Sunday October 11, 2015

God Promises Abundance

The human condition examined is the freedom that is found in God. It came from studying the passage which expresses God’s abundant promises and calls the people to be faithful to the promise keeping God. There almost seems to be a little if/then interplay taking place in this passage. However, I think this has more to do with remembering where the promises come from. Yes I do believe that this understanding is in continuity with what I believe, however it does place more emphasis on God’s action. What is novel is remembering not to receive, but to remind us where the gifts come from.

The sermon is shaped by three points: the God who promises, the God who seeks relationship and the God who is to be known. Abundance does not come from our actions it comes from God’s action in our world and in our lives. This brings us the freedom in which we live. The human condition looked at will not be stated it will be implied. The emphasis will be on God and not people.

10. Deuteronomy 6:4-8; Exodus 3:1-14; Exodus 20:1-17; Exodus 23:1-3; Micah 6:8-9

Preaching date: July 26, 2015

Judaism—sermon series on world religions continues.

What articulation of the human condition or theological anthropology has emerged from your preaching preparation? (Self-righteousness.) How did it arise – from a close reading of text itself, or in the process of engaging with the text and interpreting it? (Overview of the history of Judaism shows the appalling oppression which Jews have received at the hands of Christians in the name of God/Jesus. Do you find this understanding of the human condition to be essentially in continuity with what you already believed? John Calvin’s total depravity = all-inclusive the fallen human condition in desperate need of grace. Is there something fresh or novel about it? We always need a reminder that we need God; that our lives can be (and are) transformed by the love of God in Jesus Christ.

How will this understanding shape the sermon? [Let us intentionally get out of the way so that the love of God can be made manifest in the world. Embrace the shema; embody the belief

that God is One and that this One God is Holy and therefore we are called to live holy lives.] How will this understanding affect the way the good news is proclaimed? [Identify where we tend to (personally) live in judgement and self-righteousness so that we can intentionally get out of the way.] Will the understanding of the human condition be stated or implied? [Always clearly stated; never leave it to chance!] Does it resonate with your experience? [The brokenness of the human condition always resonates with myself!] Will you assume that all or most listeners will accept it as true, or do you plan to try to persuade them of it? [With my congregation the brokenness and need for God's amazing grace are definitely "no brainers."]

11. Joshua 2:1-21; John 6:56-69 [For sermon manuscript and listener feedback, see Appendix E, Case Study 2]

Preaching date: July 26, 2015

Dealing kindly with others emerged as a result of reading the text and in the midst of preparing. Rahab dealt kindly with the spies and in return hoped they would do the same for her and her family. For the most part this is congruous with what I already believe. It often takes courage to deal kindly with others, which is a somewhat different/new perspective I hope to articulate.

I plan on talking about what or who motives us to deal kindly with others by comparing the biblical account with the story of Harriet Tubman. When we obey God and not our earthly masters and deal kindly with others the future can change, others are impacted, and we will be remembered. The canon scripture is closed so we won't be remembered there. Most of us probably won't be remembered in a history book. But we will be remembered in the book of life. Most will accept it, but I also believe I'll need to remind them that dealing kindly with others doesn't require doing something big and grandiose. In fact most often it will be something smaller like giving food to someone who is hungry, something to drink to someone who is thirsty, welcoming a stranger, giving some of our clothes to someone who has none, caring for someone who is sick or visiting someone who is in prison (Matthew 25:34-36).

12. Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; John 6:56-69

Preaching date: August 23, 2015

In this particular case, the human condition is perhaps best summarized by the second law of thermodynamics: entropy always tends to increase. Or better, human beings seek/desire to exist in the lowest possible energy state: we are lazy, we seek to avoid work. This insight into the human condition comes from interpreting the text in Joshua – "if you are unwilling to serve the Lord choose this day whom you will serve..." and putting it into conversation with the text in John – "Do you also wish to go away?" It is hard work following the Lord. For the Israelites who are surrounded by pagan cultures and their various temptations and for us who are also surrounded by easy messages and a plethora of temptations. To follow the Lord, to be a disciple, takes work. This seems to mesh well with Jesus' experience in John. People found his words difficult, even scandalous. Jesus' question to the disciples: "Do you wish to go away?" is a real question. The human condition would urge us to answer "yes – go away. This life which Jesus calls us towards is difficult and will require work and sacrifice. Go away, go far away."

I suppose another way to think about this is through the lens of the first commandment. We so easily worship any and all other gods. Here the human condition might be described more in terms of ego/pride.

In truth, this is an old thought. I haven't thought about or articulated an understanding of the human condition in terms of thermodynamics in quite some time. It is different, I think, than the way I tend to talk about the human condition as being a tension between finitude and infinity – although I suppose it would be possible to reconcile the two. What I like about this is its easiness to understand. All of us have had the experience of watching a clean house become a

disaster and bemoaning the amount of work it is going to take to get things back in order. In the same way, I think we can understand that it is easier to walk away from Jesus.

One of the great challenges, I think, for Lutherans is complacency, laziness even. We are justified by grace through faith and not by works of the law, so why bother with works? And yet Lutheran theology insists that good works are an important part of a Christian's life. It's just that the works are only ever a response to the gift of salvation, not the cause of or the thing that merits salvation. The text in Joshua is somewhat difficult for Lutherans: choose this day whom you will serve. This might suggest that we do indeed decide for God or for Jesus. I wanted to address this decision theology at the same time that I addressed the tendency towards Lutheran laziness. How do we understand what it means to choose and how do we live faithful lives as disciples?

In this case, my understanding of the human condition is implied through the use of a quote from *Harry Potter*, "There will be a time when we must choose between what is easy and what is right." By putting easy and right up against each other (instead of right and wrong) the quote digs more deeply into human nature. Implied in this quote is that the "right" will be hard, will require effort on our part. I expect most people to accept this understanding of human nature. My hope is not to convince hearers about some great new insight into human nature, but rather to encourage them in their lives as disciples.

Job 14: 1-12; see Psalm 8

13. Psalm 8; Job 14:1-12; Genesis 1-2; Eccl. 3:18-22; Psalm 139:5-12

Preaching date: September 27, 2015

Theme: Imago Dei and Human Anthropology

Who am I/who are we that God is mindful of us? What does it mean to be human from a Christian perspective? How does this understanding differ from a secular/agnostic understanding? What's at stake? My primary research source is *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* by Ray. S. Anderson.

I reviewed my class notes on theological anthropology from [seminary] and was disappointed. It clearly was not the strongest/best topic that we'd covered. The emphasis was on sin—the human person needs Jesus because we are sinners (had the notes been from my PhD/Baptist seminary that might have made sense; but it seemed off the mark for Presby). I went to my vast bookshelves and found the Anderson book which I hadn't read previously. I read it over one evening and one morning. His emphasis resonated more with Buber and the I/thou which made much more sense to me. His scripture references are primarily OT from wisdom literature (see above). He does include Jesus, but his emphasis is that we are most fully human first because we are created in the Imago Dei—covenant and creation. His remarks also resonate with the Trinity sermon from week 2 of this series.

Highlights that I expect to bring up in the sermon: Contrast between Job's view of the human person and the psalmist's view. The inherited from the Enlightenment dichotomy between the "natural person" and the "religious person" and how that impacts our understanding of theological anthropology. I think therefore I am; compared to God is therefore we are. Jesus tented among us—theological anthropology as the true humanity that Jesus revealed. Creation and covenant—humanity as determined by the Other (Buber's I/Thou); I am only me because of my interaction with You. Imago Dei and the Westminster Catechism—the chief end of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

Freedom and Response-ability: invitation to the 7th Day and rest with God. To be human means to realize, remember, live: we are created by God, addressed by God and charged to care for all creation; redeemed by God through JC for all eternity—now and forever. Close with Ps 139:5-14 (I cannot hide from you.)

Preaching on the nature of humanity comes at a poignantly timely moment in the life of [congregation] as one of our beloved deacons has just been diagnosed with terminal cancer at age

55. Many people from the church have been visiting her at the hospital during the past 10 days as she has had gall bladder surgery and then the discovery of cancer of an unknown (as yet) source with the prediction that she has 1-2 years to live. I had planned to preach on humanity/theological anthropology at this point in the sermon series; it is now almost too timely. It feels almost as if I am preparing to give a pre-funeral sermon to prepare us all for the ultimate earthly death of our beloved sister infused with the eternal hope of the Gospel. Death is a common enough topic at church; perhaps unusually so given the average young age of the congregation. However, I have always had a pragmatic perspective which regularly and openly share: we're all going to die. I see finitude/death not as a fearful limitation on "life" on earth, but the parameters for earthly living which then must encourage/inspire/guide life NOW. Given the fact that we're all going to die, how might we live our lives NOW for the glory of God?

I don't plan every word; I always stand amazed at what the presence of the HS does through proclamation of the Word.

14. Psalm 8 [For sermon manuscript and listener feedback, see Appendix E, Case Study 6]

Preaching date: October 4, 2015

Psalm 8 is one of the Bible's core texts for establishing the human condition, and it sets forth the biblical paradox: On the one hand, humans are insignificant in the vastness of creation. On the other hand, God is mindful of us, and gives us dominion over creation. What is novel about this approach is to have the human condition as the focus of the sermon. I hope I can make it fresh, in part, by looking at how modern humanity might amplify both of the Psalmists insights – we have a great sense of the vastness of the universe, and thus our insignificance, but we also have greater dominion (responsibility) over creation.

My plan is basically exposition, so that whenever anyone returns to this Psalm they can ponder the paradox of humanity. Much will be stated quite directly, since the human condition is the subject of the Psalm and the sermon. I think people can be persuaded. There is a shadow side to both assertions about humanity that need to be counteracted: one, a nihilist sense that because we are insignificant nothing we do matters, and two, the vague affirmation that we are all inherently special apart from "God's mindfulness" of us.

Psalm 23; see Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Psalm 55; see Acts 1:15-26

Psalm 121; see II Timothy 4:6-8

Psalm 139:5-12; see Psalm 8

Ecclesiastes 3:18-22; see Psalm 8

15. Jeremiah 31:31-34

Preaching date: October 25, 2015

human condition: vulnerability; Promise as a category demands vulnerability. A promise is not a promise unless there is the potential for failure. We know this deep down and it scares us. We'd rather have certainty. We do all kinds of things to protect ourselves from this vulnerability that is inherent in finite life. This articulation of the human condition cuts close to the core of what I have been thinking about over the past while. It arises secondarily from the text. God here through Jeremiah promises to make a new covenant with Israel. On what grounds does God agree to make this new covenant? There is no ground – it is pure grace on the part of God. God chooses to remember our sins no more and to forgive our iniquity. All depends on God. This leaves us vulnerable: what if God doesn't keep God's promise?

It is Reformation Sunday – a good day to talk about grace. I will not need to convince the congregation that God is gracious – they will accept this witness. But I do think it will take a little work to talk about vulnerability. Promise is a good Lutheran word. We like to talk about God’s promises for us. But because we also deep down understand that promise opens us up to being vulnerable, we also need to remind each other again and again of God’s faithfulness, to tell the stories of how God has delivered and saved us in the past, to point to the gift of Spirit as a pledge of God’s faithfulness.

16. Lamentations 3:22-33

Preaching date: June 28, 2015

Human condition: limited horizon, impulse towards self-preservation, impulse towards scapegoating

This sermon was prepared in light of the shooting event at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC and in response to a call from presiding bishop Eaton for a day of repentance. My sermon preparation was informed not only by attention to the text but also by attention to the national conversation that happened after the shooting. Whenever a tragedy like this occurs there is shock and horror but also a naïve attitude that says well that couldn’t happen here. Or an attempt is made to distinguish ourselves from the perpetrator, to label the perpetrator as completely other. In this particular case, the evil of racism is at the heart of the tragedy. Conversations of race and racism have been bubbling beneath the surface of our national conversation for a while and this particular event seems to have had the ability to bring the conversation out into the open. We have been forced to see that there is a gap that exists between who we are called to be and who we really are. Having just finished reading *Unclean*, I think disgust psychology can be helpful here to understand how such an event could happen.

The preaching text is actually the section in Lamentations that offers hope and a word of comfort. The temptation would be to preach only these verses and ignore the rest of what Lamentations has to say, to move very quickly through confession and right to absolution.

In the sermon I say explicitly that we cannot ignore the witness of the whole book of Lamentations. And again that we cannot live in our happy place and pretend we do not know what is going on in the world. Too often I am tempted to skirt more political issues like racism. I’ll talk about the issue without naming it for what it is. In this particular case I wanted to speak openly and directly about what had happened. I also wanted to counter any thought that such things couldn’t happen here in the Midwest. In this particular case, the good news comes when we take seriously the worry voiced at the end of Lamentations “unless [God has] utterly rejected us, and [is] angry with us beyond measure.” I also wanted to be clear that the gospel does not stand apart from the violence or tragedy, rather it is born in the midst of it. God’s reconciling and healing love is most clearly revealed when we are at our most violent.

Ezekiel 37:1-14; see Acts 2:1-21

17. Amos 5:6-15; Mark 10:17-81

Preaching date: October 11, 2015

Series: Christianity 101 - Theme: Sin

I opted to preach the sermon series theme from the lectionary texts of the week, largely because of the great conversation during the lectionary study group, but also because of the clear connection between these texts and...sin. I used *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* by Ray. S. Anderson as my conversation partner. Anderson’s summary of the view of sin through the centuries was quite enlightening to see the different theological “spins” from the Greeks, Hebrews, Paul, Augustine, Pelagius, Calvin & Luther, Arminius to the Enlightenment/Age of Reason. The rapid sin history lesson traced the various views and gave an excellent context for a 21st century sermon.

I use notes for preaching, but I do go with the flow of what the Spirit puts on my heart during proclamation of the Word. The unplanned key theme that arose during preaching: the excuses that we give God are, in fact, our greatest sins. These excuses separate us from relationship and from being who God has created us to be (*imago Dei*). I used the symbol of an apple for the children's story to talk about so-called original sin—and later referenced back to that apple with the adults/sermon as the excuse we give God to justify our poor choices/lazy faith. Whether we say, as Flip Wilson once did, "The devil made me do it," or as Adam we blame Eve, as Eve we blame the snake, or perhaps we go one more and blame God because God put that tree right smack in front of us to deliberately tempt us—and clearly if God hadn't have put that tree there we wouldn't have sinned in the first place. So, blame became the unexpected theme/focus of the sermon on sin.

Micah 6:8-9; see Deuteronomy 6:4-8

18. Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6

Preaching date: December 6, 2015

My reading of the human condition emerged from engaging the texts and in particular their contexts. Neither is distinctly a "gospel" word, but each instead insists on repentance.

Repentance presumes error; an earlier chapter of Malachi reveals the error to be a hypocritical religiosity, including offering sick animals and spoiled grain in obedience to ritual demands. In Luke's gospel, John the Baptist preaches repentance, but follows with a recitation of Messianic expectations from Isaiah. What is striking, particularly in the Malachi reading, is that the refining fire and fuller's soap that will cleanse the people is offered for our hearing absent any reason needed for cleansing. It is as if the lectionary composers took as their theme, "Simul justus sort of peccator." This phenomenon, which happens frequently in the Revised Common Lectionary, distorts what I believe to be a more accurate anthropology. Without repentance, God's grace seems a kind, thoughtful gesture, but not salvific. It seems more like a helping hand than the strong arm that saves.

The foundational understanding emerged through a personal story from my childhood of making my room tidy by shoving everything under the bed; it looked good, but there is chaos just out of sight. This led to some contextual observations about the ancient Israelites and John the Baptist.

In this particular sermon, I confessed by own familiarity with going through the motions, giving to my parishioners offerings tainted with their own kind of pinkeye or spoilage, and suggested that they might know something of that reality in their own relationships or in the academic work for which they are responsible. No one voiced objection to my insinuations.

19. Matthew 19:4-6

Preaching date: October 17, 2015

Wedding Sermon

Marriage is a moment to pause and reflect on our lives and to see how God is a part of this. I use an example of a blue apple, which I spray paint as an example of something that is unique. Something that I say I look high and low for, risk life and limb to find and when I find it I want to keep it away from the elements and hide it so it doesn't change or get affected by the world around us. And that is the love that brings us to the point of making a lifelong commitment to another human being.

I talk about the blue apple and then about 3 words, communication, commitment and Christ. Without these three things a marriage will not work. Much like life, if we do not have Christ it is like a wheel spinning in mud. We need to communicate with our loved ones, and be committed to them, as love will not always be there and it is the commitment that keeps us going. I think it depends on the couple and the crowd at a wedding if they buy or accept that Christ is

necessary, and sometimes it takes more persuasion, but sometimes not. Just the simplicity of making it known and proclaiming it is what I feel called to do, and the is all I can do, be true to my calling to make Christ known in all places at all times.

20. Matthew 28:18-20

Preaching date: October 4, 2015

(I strayed from the lectionary. Please find it in your heart to forgive me. I did not want to deal with the divorce text on World Communion Sunday. Avoiding the human condition?)

I focused on the disciples doubt and our doubt. (I see that trusting in God becomes a recurring theme for me.) We doubt our ability or even God's ability in us to do what God asks.

I used the Great Commission as an opportunity to demonstrate just how much Jesus believes in us and trusts the abilities that we have. Jesus doesn't just send the disciples to nice safe neighborhoods, he sends them out to the whole world. I attempted to address this in both my page one and page two. In page three my theme was God promises to be with the disciples. In page four, God promises to be with us.

I ended the sermon by asking, "Where is Jesus sending us?"

21. Mark 4:35-41

Preaching date: June 21, 2015

Wind & Water: The Storms of Life

The expectation that Jesus wants us to perish. The expectation that we somehow deserve perishing...ties back to Simon Peter's exclamation on the lake that "he is a sinner." The wages of sin are death, but not this kind of death.

Human inability to trust when good things are happening that good things can happen. That the revelation of God is much better than we expect...it's more than life-saving. Why did Jesus want to go for a night sail? Jesus asleep —> reminds us of his very fully human-ness. Posture of one who trusts in God. Assumption is that sleep means not caring. Rebuked the wind. A reminder that he is fully God. The wind rebuked like an unclean spirit. Has power to defeat evil. Does not mean that we are going to be defeated by evil at God's command. In fact, the storms of life that threaten to overwhelm us are not for our own deserving.

Result: they were filled with great awe and asked "Who is this...?" Having faith vs. being afraid. Awe - different from being afraid; typical response to a divine encounter. Wind & Storm manifest the very real danger of being in the boat with Christ. —Meda Stamper *Working Preacher*. The crossing over the sea means crossing into Gentile territory. Perishing - in active voice, in a few chapter same verb used when J says, "For those who want to save their life must lose it and those who lose their life will be saved" (8:35). Dangers are real, but taking up with Jesus is life-affirming option.

Often during life's difficult times we assume the worst, that God is "out to get us" or teach us a lesson about how we've behaved badly. We can identify with the disciples who incredulously ask Jesus, "Do you not care that we are perishing?!" But what if God's power and desires for human life include not just getting by, but awe and amazement.

22. Mark 5:21-43

Preaching date: June 28, 2015

This was a scattershot sermon, but some of the more interesting aspects of the human condition that were touched upon were Jesus' words that set up fear as the opposite of faith ("do not fear; only believe.") and our sense of limitation – as human beings, we only have so much time and ability to help. The first pairing comes from the implications of Jesus' words. The second insight came from trying to relate to Jesus as he is confronted with an urgent situation (the woman with the hemorrhage) in the midst of dealing with an even more important situation (the girl who is dying). I didn't do much with the fear/faith contrast, but that is something worth

returning to; sometimes we get stuck in a mindset of contrasting faith and doubt, for instance, and it is worth shaking up those formulations. I think people really resonated with the other insight, which was dominant – that real life is characterized by multiple demands being placed on us, far beyond our capacities. Even when we want to do good, we are very limited. I never said this, but in talking about these feelings of limitation, what I was really saying is “you are not God.” That is a big part of the human condition.

The good news, in response to our limitation, became “Even when we are limited, Jesus is not. He is the one for whom it is never too late.” I think I believe this, but somehow it isn’t totally satisfying; it still isn’t clear what I should do, other than point others to Jesus (which, I admit, is not a bad starting point). That is a small nagging concern; for the most part, it worked – it worked in preaching, it worked for me personally as a gospel message, and I think it is faithful to the story. “You are not God, as disappointing as that may be. Jesus, however, is. And that is good news for us who need help.”

23. Mark 5:21-43

Preaching date: June 28, 2015

An overwhelming challenge in preparing for this sermon has been the reality of deep pain and chaos in the world around us. I am very aware of the tension that the mass shouting in South Carolina created and the call to speak to the issue of racism but need to speak to the pain and challenges facing our community of faith and well as [community] post flood.

Part of what happens is the work of God being done on the way to the work we are called to. There is a great crowd pressing in on Jesus, demanding his attention but able in the midst to know that he has been touched by the woman in need. I hope that we too reach out to Jesus and press in to experience what God is doing in our midst. Also, as a people of faith not be impatient about the interruptions in our lives but look for the holy in the midst. It is hard to be patient when you lose access to the outside world – electronically disconnected during the flood. Many were inconvenienced versus having life being forever changed.

24. Mark 6:1-13

Preaching date: July 5, 2015

This text lays out what we truly need to be followers/disciples of Jesus. There is nothing about degrees or years of study with the only qualification needed being that they are chosen, commissioned and equipped by Christ. Pack light, no extras – none of the “just in case we need it...”

Personally I have traveled a lot over the years and able to wonder with my listeners how our families survived traveling without air conditioning, DVD players, seatbelts and all the other things that we put in to play for road trips. We also put in even more “necessities” for life itself. This passage calls us to embrace our whole life as one of living out our faith as Luther would say, our vocation. This is about our faith meeting us in our day to day life and not simply what we step into on Sunday morning when we come to worship. It is about living out our baptismal call being instruments of God’s peace, seeking justice, doing kindness and walking humbly with God. I think that most of my listeners believe that it is easier for me as a pastor to do this but I believe we can all live out a faith every day and maybe need to practice looking back and seeing how it has happened in their life.

25. Mark 6:14-25 [For sermon manuscript and listener feedback, see Appendix E, Case Study 1]

Preaching date: July 19, 2015

The human condition doesn’t get any heavier than in this text. Here’s how several different aspects of the human condition arose from the text and found their way into the sermon:

Tragic and senseless death. This arises, of course, from John's untimely and meaningless death at Herod's command. Whenever we hear about events like this, we are at the same time troubled by the bald senselessness of it, struggling for meaning, and worried that it could happen to us or someone we love. This sermon was preached in the midst of a series of mass shootings, those in Charleston and Chattanooga.

Folly and sin as the cause of senseless death. This arises from Herod's foolish behavior and its disastrous consequences. I have preached on this previously, so it got less attention this time.

Denial of death by numbing of the senses. This arises from the banquet of Herod, its implied contrast with the banquet of Jesus later in the chapter (feeding of the 5000), and the connection to our modern world (as described in *How (Not) to be Secular*). What are we really doing by overfeeding ourselves, and filling every spare moment with entertainment, if not distracting ourselves from our own mortality?

Fear of death. Here is the heart of the matter. We are all afraid of death. This is particularly true in current times, as we are more prosperous, living longer, and focused in our culture on material things and all that makes for human flourishing.

This focus on our fear of death and sense of being unprepared for it arose by empathizing with the events of the story, and putting it together with current events. This is something I already believed about the human condition, but it isn't something I have preached on much or heard preached on ever.

The good news is that God prepares us for death. The doctrine guiding this sermon is the Resurrection. Something unique about this sermon is that I had to look outside the pericope for the good news – looking to Hebrews 2:15, all the stories of John the Baptist that show he recognized Jesus, and the stories of the resurrection of Christ (represented in the sermon by a description of an icon of the resurrection). I am sure that most or all listeners will accept that we fear death and feel unprepared for death. I hope that, in telling the truth about our fear of death, they may be more ready to consider the possibility and the implications of the resurrection.

I think people will also basically accept the secondary premise, that our culture is largely built around ignoring and denying death. I think people are less likely to have already thought and accepted this, but I think they will likely recognize this description of our culture. The articulation I found, influenced by Charles Taylor, is to ask, "what (if anything) is more important to us than just staying alive?"

26. Mark 6:30-34, 53-56, Psalm 23

Preaching date: July 12, 2015

This sermon, I think, is trying to address the human condition in two different ways. First, it talks about human vulnerability, powerlessness, weakness and need. This arises from the sheep/shepherd imagery in the texts, and the types of people Mark says were coming to Jesus or being brought to him. My refrain for that is "little ones to him belong." Second, and mostly drawing from sources outside these pericopes, I want to address how we sometimes resist humility, don't want to ask for help, and in short, don't want to be Jesus' "little ones." Reaching outside this text seemed warranted and important because I think the contrast is implied, and it would be present anyway in many peoples' minds as they think of other times when Jesus didn't always react in this same way when people came to him. Those who approached him with an agenda other than a deep and genuine need often received confrontation of some type.

I think my reflection on this helped me understand this contrast a little better, how Jesus is always "God for us" but how sometimes that is pure gospel and help, but sometimes there is first confrontation and law.

I formulated the good news a little differently because of the clarity I got in reflection. It is about the different ways we approach Jesus, but I found I didn't want to say "people who approach Jesus differently get a different Jesus" – that's not true, and it certainly isn't gospel.

Instead, I said something like, “people who approach as little ones get to see him as he truly is.” Also, I could make the gospel apply to all by simply acknowledging that we all, at some point in our lives, will be “little ones” in need, and probably even now, in some aspects of our lives, we are “little ones” in need, and reaching out to Jesus from that place in our life we will encounter him as he truly is. That certainly fits my experience, and I think people will relate, and maybe even have some new insight. It is disturbing, after all, to read about or in some way encounter the confronting Jesus. This reflection should take some of the fear out of that.

27. Mark 7:1-23, James 1:17-27

Preaching date: August 30, 2015

The articulation of the human condition was not particularly fresh – the focus was on the correlation between outer actions and words with an inner reality, our hearts. We want to separate what we say and do from who we are at our core, so as to excuse ourselves, but telling the truth means acknowledging that those outward bad behaviors are a reflection of a problem in our hearts. This arose from a very direct statement of Jesus in Mark 7:21: “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.” It doesn’t get much more direct than that.

Interestingly, I don’t think I am sure most will accept this; it is a hard word, and so our resistance to it is great. I will use my usual tactics for getting through resistance: humor, seeing how this plays out in others’ lives before looking to our own, seeing how the honest naming of human evil also protects from others’ evil (even as it convicts us).

The gospel I had to get at in a round-about way – Using the language of hearts to talk about God’s work of changing hearts, and using the concept of the outer-inner correlation to talk about God’s loving actions revealing God’s loving heart.

28. Mark 7:1-23

Preaching date: August 30, 2015

This text hits close to home here now because we are in a financial crunch and I spoke about where our hearts are at. And one comment I made was that I can tell you where your heart is if you show me one thing, your check book. Where our treasure is there our heart will be also. So we need to look at where our heart is and not be white washed tombs. We are programed to look out for #1, the unholy Trinity of me, myself and I, and to get beyond the evil in us, we need to focus on Jesus. Our condition is to look out for us, and Jesus calls us beyond this.

I spoke about how none of us want to hear if you put \$5.00 in the offering plate and then spend \$50 on lunch that is not what God is asking for. And we can all do things that make us look like we follow Jesus, but then not believe it or follow it in our lives. Our actions speak volumes. We do not want to be called on this, but we need to all see that our actions speak what we believe, and if we are doing something to be seen, this is not what Jesus called us to do, but when people see our heart-felt actions that lead to faith they will be led to see why this is happening.

29. Mark 7:24-37, James 2:1-10, 14-17 [For sermon manuscript and listener feedback, see Appendix E, Case Study 5]

Preaching date: September 6, 2015

In light of recent events, I want to draw attention to our prejudices. I expect my hearers to accept pride and prejudice as a faithful description of the human condition. What I wonder is will the hearers accept the proclamation of the gospel as being the in-breaking of the kingdom in an unexpected time and place. That is, will they see or receive the gospel as being more than the physical healing? Will they accept physical healing as a consequence of the reconciliation between Jesus and the Syrophonecian woman? In this case, I feel like I will have to persuade them of the gospel.

30. Mark 7:24-37, James 2:1-10, 14-17 [For sermon manuscript and listener feedback, see Appendix E, Case Study 4]

Preaching date: September 6, 2015

My insight is that prejudice is part of the human condition – even before it can be considered something for which we are culpable. Prejudice just begins with not knowing any better. For many people, including myself on other occasions, Christological commitments have made us uneasy about hearing prejudice in Jesus' words in this text, but, with Mark, I want to see Jesus as truly human, and so I have to be open to the possibility that his harsh words are the words of a prejudice that simply doesn't know any better. I can rationalize that it is actually the human prejudice of his disciples that he is giving voice to, but I am not including that caveat in the sermon this time around, to keep the focus on prejudice if I can.

I think this is a clarification of what I already believed – that there is a spectrum of prejudice, from unconscious to willful to demonic. Making that distinction for the congregation may help them both admit to the prejudice they have, while also taking seriously the evil that unexamined or unchallenged prejudice can cause.

The human condition will be stated: there is prejudice, and there is prejudice – and our reluctance to acknowledge and deal with prejudice in its natural forms inhibits our ability to resist it in its most rigid and evil forms. I think this will take some direct persuasion, but that people might be able to become less defensive and search their hearts. I will start with a humorous story that will perhaps disarm them and lower walls of defensiveness. I will speak of even Jesus putting his foot in his mouth, in the hope people will feel the freedom to reach out and experience difference. It isn't a choice between super-careful political correctness or "anything goes" – it is a lived answer of making mistakes, and confronting evil at the same time.

31. Mark 8:27-38; Philippians 2:6-11

Preaching date: September 13, 2015

Preaching theme: Christology (Jesus: Prophet, Priest, and King)

(Peter's profession of Jesus as Lord + "pick up your cross and follow me);

Preparation began by reviewing Systematic Theology 1 notes from 2005. It was interesting to review the "systematic" interpretation of Jesus from the various significant theologies through the centuries (Anselm, Abelard, Calvin, Barth) complemented by more recent theologians (liberation, Black theology, feminist theology). Clearly this is a massive topic for one sermon. I also review a Christology paper I had written ten years ago (and not looked at since). It succinctly combines the diverse voices and does a very good job of presenting an overview of the theme "Christology." What's missing from this review of "systematic theology 101" today is exactly what seemed to be absent from the material when I originally took the course: the practicality of the theory for daily/contemporary life. Okay, so Jesus is "Prophet, Priest, and King," SO WHAT? What is the significance and the implication for contemporary life amidst all its messiness?

I reviewed the list of paired words that Paul sent over a week or so ago to see what might spark the "so what" for my particular congregation. I also incorporated the Gospel text in three different contexts during the week for review, reflection, and feedback (Tuesday morning pastor lectionary group; Tuesday evening Session/church leadership meeting *lectio devina*; Friday morning devotion/mini *lectio devina* to open the Mission, Outreach, and Justice committee meeting of Mission Presbytery—representing 150 Presbyterian churches across South Texas. Of all the feedback in these various contexts, what stands out the most is the simple statement made that HOW one defines "Lord" shapes HOW one responds. All the theory and readings of brilliant scholars comes to naught compared to the simple question of "How do YOU see Jesus as Lord of YOUR life."

Related in my reflection this week: I spent all day Wednesday inside a detention center which currently has 500 immigrant women and children who are seeking asylum in the USA. It is

“level one” detention, but it is very much jail. I was back again on Friday for a conversation with some of the leadership people at this detention center as part of the mission, outreach, and justice committee work (the staff graciously agreed to meet with us). I was struck, as always, by the profound faith of the incarcerated immigrant mothers whom I come into contact with. In our dechurched/post-Christian USA Western world of self-sufficiency and “can do” attitude of SELF, the gift these immigrants bring to the USA is profound and unshakable faith in God/Jesus/Spirit. This gift they bring is much-needed amidst our cynicism and affluence. So I look again at the list of word/preaching pairs and the one that seems the most relevant is “meaninglessness/purpose. To understand, believe, and LIVE our lives truly believing that Jesus is LORD changes everything and adds significance and purpose to our lives.

32. Mark 8:27-38

Preaching date: September 13, 2015

This text was a familiar one to my congregation. I have preached on the confession of St. Peter in the past. I have always agreed that this text is central to the Gospel of Mark. The question of Jesus’ identity and what that means for the followers of Jesus is the primary theme of the Gospel. I called my sermon “Mistaken Identity.” Peter assigns Jesus the correct title when he calls him the Messiah. But Jesus’ command to stay silent after hearing this confession reminds that while Peter has the correct title, he still has the wrong definition of that title.

The human condition I wanted to lift up is the fact that we all too often want God to be who we want God to be. But as David Lose wrote, “Jesus will only be the God we need, not the God we want.”

The human condition was explicitly stated in the sermon. I am fairly certain the people hearing the sermon were able to relate to this. This point was not new to them. As I mentioned above, I have preached on this before. I struggled with this but finally decided that it was so important to talk about that it was okay to repeat myself. We need to regularly consider the question – Who do you say Jesus is? And we need to regularly consider what the answer to that question means for the way we live our lives.

33. Mark 8:27-38

Preaching date: September 13, 2015

The human condition I want to engage here is a pretty simple one – the tendency to look for a Messiah in all the wrong places, and the tendency to try to be our own Messiah. This arises from the text indirectly: Peter labeling Jesus as the Messiah means no one else is. I think this topic is on my mind because of my own efforts to be “all things to all people” and from hearing the frustration (or unwarranted hope) in people’s voices as they talk about presidential candidates.

I get to preach a three pointer! Point one: don’t look to others to be your newest greatest Messiah. Point two: don’t look to yourself either. Point three: look to Jesus. He’s the Messiah. I think I can get people to come along if I flesh this out a little – what do we hear people saying about candidates, and others? Could any human being live up to those expectations? What do you see people trying to do, as if it all depends on them? The illustration will be a “want ad” – who can answer the job description of a Messiah? Who will try, and who can actually do it?

34. Mark 8:27-9:1

Preaching date: September 13, 2015

My theme: Jesus helps us understand who he is. (Because of our human condition, we do not have the capacity to do this on our own.) Even when Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah, he misunderstands what that means. I talked about how, we really do not know him that well, especially when Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and take up the cross and follow. For us that is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to do.

Page One: The disciples do not understand Jesus

Page Two: We do not understand Jesus.

Page Three: Jesus shows the disciples who he is.

Page Four: Jesus shows us who he is.

As we follow Jesus there will be moments when we understand perfectly (A Methodist word). At such moments if he were to ask us, “Who do you say that I am? We would say, “The Messiah.”

35. Mark 9:30-37

Preaching date: September 20, 2015

When confronted with an idea that is not native to our current system of thinking, we ignore it. In this case, Jesus predicts his death for the second time, but this outcome is inconsistent with what their expectations for the movement. If Jesus dies, how can he be the Messiah? So the disciples ignore the comment and begin arguing about who's greater. Jesus' teaching is rejected out of hand because it doesn't compute.

This is not the way I tend to articulate the human condition. That is, I don't think I've really thought about this particular aspect of the human condition before in any great detail. The articulation arises from the juxtaposition of the two stories in the reading. Jesus is talking about life and death and the disciples are squabbling over who's the best. But, this reaction of the disciples has to be viewed in context. This is the second of Jesus' predictions. After the first prediction, Peter pulled Jesus aside and chastised him. That did not turn out well for Peter, as Jesus chastised him right back calling him Satan. The disciples this time try ignoring Jesus' words. There will be a third prediction and the disciple will again fail to learn what Jesus is trying to teach them. One may wonder, how do we communicate (actually convey) a message that goes against expectations?

While this is not the way I tend to talk about the human condition, it is in keeping with my experience. Studies have shown people can live with a fair amount of cognitive dissonance in their lives. If presented with information or data that goes against what they hold to be true, there is a good chance that new information or data will be rejected out of hand. Apparently it is easier to disregard evidence than to change our opinion about something.

In this case, my understanding of the human condition will be implicit. I will try to draw attention to it by pointing out the irony of the two juxtaposing scenes. To be honest, I'm not sure what the resolution is to this particular statement of the human condition. In the end, my sermon did not provide an answer to it. This was our God's Work. Our Hands. Sunday. And so instead of dealing with the issue of communication, I focused on the tension that arises between the disciples' understanding of greatness/power and Jesus' understanding of greatness/power. This gave me a chance to talk about service.

36. Mark 9:30-37

Preaching date: September 20, 2015

A four letter word – FEAR! We do some really stupid and crazy things when we let fear have a hold on our lives. The disciples didn't get what Jesus was saying and so started going on the way of fear into who is the greatest. They let fear hold them from being with Jesus and worrying about something they couldn't control. They allowed the fear to hold them captive. Fear is something we all deal with, and it is in our lives. We can allow it to hold us or control us, or we can stare it in the face and tell it has no place here. Fear is not something that will ever completely leave us, but it is not something that has to control us.

I preached on the stupid stuff we do because of fear, and how it holds us and manipulates us. There was no persuasion needed on this, fear is something we all feel and know is present. We can't possibly move forward if we are holding on to the past and the fear of what could happen, we can't change it. We are not allowing God to have hold of our lives if we live I fear of what was, will, or could be. We need to allow God to have total control. That is where we all might

need convincing, and when I preach it is mostly preaching to myself, because it is a message I need to hear. We all need to let go of fear and worry and live in God.

37. Mark 9:30-37

Preaching date: September 20, 2015

I think a faithful reading of the text points us to human vulnerability. Some interpretations idealize childhood, and some good sermons can come out of that, but in Jesus' time, and really in all times and places, children are the poster children of vulnerability. So how do we face our own vulnerability, or, putting ourselves in the disciples' shoes, how do we encounter God by engaging the vulnerability of children?

"Jesus took a child and placed it among them..." How do we picture this child? A Victorian or Precious Moments child? Or a familiar one? Or a needy one, or a migrant child, or a troubled child? A real child. How do we respond to the real children in our lives? Might we welcome God there?

38. Mark 9:38-50

Preaching date: September 27, 2015

What does it mean to have salt in yourself and be at peace with one another? The text has almost a whiny sound to it like a child tattling on someone. Mark presents a series of ignorance and enlightenment stories. It seems as though there is an ongoing desire to contain and set up perimeters on how God is going to work and who God will work through. The enlightenment comes as Jesus continues to redirect the disciples and others on who can and cannot do the work of God.

I wonder how many of our members spend more time watching others and judging them as insiders or outsiders. This sermon comes on the heels of direct call to welcome all but clearly the disciples are trying to micromanage who gets to do what in the work of God. My current congregation benefits from my years of experience because I can draw examples of how others have tried to micromanage God without pointing fingers. My hope is that we are drawn into a place where living out our faith can be a journey without the fear of judgment and exclusion but instead okay to learn and grow. We need to be salt in ourselves and be at peace with one another – in community it can be a challenge but worth the effort. Both judgment and forgiveness.

39. Mark 10:2-16, Genesis 2:18-24, Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Preaching date: October 4, 2015

We are not meant to be alone but in relationship with others (Genesis 2:18). As part of God's creation, we are never totally solitary (2:19-20). By God's grace, our lives give birth to one another (2:21-22). Complementary genders are the basis for life's continuation, but God is the source of it all (2:23-24). Jesus moves freely between hard, hierarchical boundaries and between life and death, making us his brothers and sisters and all of us one family (Hebrews 1-2). Jesus transcends the issue of divorce and gives attention to the sick children- though weakest, a model of faith (Mark 10:2-16). When we reflect upon our dependence to creation's life, God's grace and love for us become more real to us.

In my rural context, most spousal and family relationships are economically dependent upon one another. Adultery, divorce and maintaining unhealthy relationships are an accepted reality. We are lonely, but also "tired" of long-standing intimate relationships. I hope to re-ignite an awareness of each other's unique, God-given identity and God's steadfast loyalty to us in the midst of our broken relationships. Guilt in relation to divorce may need to be initially addressed, but hope to open up an awareness of deep relationships founded not upon sexual needs or "rights" (patriarchy is a real problem here), but upon the life we share through total dependence upon God. Reconciliation and mutual dependence upon one another could be a hard sell for many, but

also affirming for those who have gone through the ordeal of broken relationships and have experienced forgiveness.

Mark 10:17-31; see Amos 5:6-15

40. Mark 10:17-31

Preaching date: Oct 11, 2015

Human condition: existential angst – am I good enough? No matter how many times we hear the gospel, we can't help asking this question, am I good enough, have I done enough, what do I need to do, etc. Grace without limits is unfathomable to us. This question is right there in the text: what do I have *to do* to inherit eternal life? This is in continuity with what I believe. Actually, I should really say, what I believe is in continuity with and has grown out of this articulation. Here I find myself at the heart of Lutheran belief – we are justified by grace through faith. Of course we aren't good enough. But being good enough doesn't matter, God loves us anyway. God loves us for no reason – grace!

In the text, the man is trying to find and learn the secret. Despite the fact that he has kept the commandments, he still doesn't think he has done enough. This was Luther's dilemma. How could he be certain of God's forgiveness? The good news for me in this text is in the aside – Jesus looking at him, loved him. Jesus loved him! Even before Jesus launches into his spiel about giving away money and possessions to the poor, Jesus loved the man. Jesus' love is not held out as a reward for fulfilling the command to give his money away, Jesus' love is given just because.

This text sounds kind of preachy. Jesus seems to be laying down law – if you want to follow me, go do these things. But instead discipleship is about response. Jesus' words are an invitation to a way of life that is centered in gratuitous love. I want to be clear about this before talking about the ways in which discipleship gets embodied. While I expect the congregation to accept what I am saying, as I mentioned above, we find this hard to accept.

41. Mark 10:17-31 [For sermon manuscript and listener feedback, see Appendix E, Case Study 7]

Preaching date: October 11, 2015

Human nature, as demonstrated by the “rich young man,” is the tendency to quantify, to compare quantities, to be unsatisfied, to want more. Once we have “counted,” we hold what we have very dearly. This text is often misused in service of financial stewardship drives, so I wanted to engage the stewardship themes, but to do it more faithfully. The image of redeemed humanity that emerges from the text is what Jesus invites the man into: relationship with the poor. “Learning to count differently” means beginning to see all the mothers, brothers, sisters, homes, and fields God gives us through relationship.

I want to talk about money, but talk about it in terms of relationship. How is the invitation to give an invitation into relationship with others? And it is an opportunity to go a little deeper – the initial question is “what must I do to be saved?” The deeper problem is that we see salvation as a transaction. Salvation isn't a transaction – it is a relationship, as well.

42. Mark 10:17-31

Preaching date: October 11, 2015

This text was about the rich man who was told to go and sell everything. I opened the sermon with the story I had heard about Roman soldiers being baptized with their right hand out of the water, because that is their sword hand. And when we get baptized we hold our right hand out of the water with our wallet in it. We do not want God to have our money, and we think if we come to God unfettered, or unburdened, then we can keep our money. But we cannot be unfettered or unburdened by holding on to something tighter than we hold onto God. It is also not about unburdening ourselves, as the eye of the needle gate, where the camel had to be unloaded

and then crawl through the gate. The gate doesn't exist and it is a way for us to make this passage easier to swallow. The gospel in its grace and mercy is not easy to swallow and we need to take it as it comes.

We need to hold on to God and trust only in Him, because it is not possible for us to make it on our own. The only way we can make it is to trust in God, because what is impossible for us is a mere walk in the park for the creator of the universe.

43. Mark 10:17-31

Preaching date: October 11, 2015

I wondered, how poor to we have to be? Is Jesus calling us to a life of poverty? I talked about my friend, Pope Francis. As a Jesuit he took the vow of poverty. When he was elected pope he maintained that vow. He lives in an efficiency apartment; he reaches out to the poor, and drives around the United States in a FIAT. Still, he is not poor. He has a place to live, health care and a jet that flies him around the world.

The concern about what Jesus wants us to give away was a major focus. On pages three and four, I suggested that Jesus does not call us to be poor—to a life of poverty—instead he calls us to a life of discipleship. I suggested that Jesus may not call us to sell everything we have and give the money to the poor, Jesus wants more. He wants our whole life and all of our commitment.

44. Mark 10:32-45

Preaching date: October 18, 2015

For this sermon, I am exploring fallen humanity, but a specific kind of fallen humanity – “Humanity on religion.” Like James and John, we think we have a special relationship with Jesus, and thus with God. Our religion gives us special status, special privileges.

The good news was fun to formulate, as I realized that God doesn't wait for us to get “religion” right, any more than Jesus waited for James and John to figure out discipleship and servanthood before he would go to the cross. He just went, and bid them follow. He didn't teach them until they understood, he showed them and become their servant. He led them, served them, saved them.

45. Mark 10:35-45

Preaching date: October 18, 2015

We all want to be on top. James and John come to Jesus and ask to sit one on the right hand and one at his left hand in his glory. First off Jesus sits at the right hand of God, so at Jesus' left hand is God, so one of the brothers wants God the Father's seat... But if we are truly honest with ourselves, wouldn't we all take that seat? We want to be the chief and ruler of our lives. We want to be in control.

In order to be first we must be last, but we cannot be last to be first! We must put others in front of ourselves, and think of the need of the other before we think of our own needs. It isn't about being the greatest, or the least. It is about understanding that we are not the most important person in the world and the world does not revolve around us. This takes persuasion for most of us, as the inner need of all humans is to be in control and when we think of others first, we have to give up control, and not use power if we have it to make others do what we want, but use that power in service to others.

46. Mark 10:35-45

Preaching date: October 18, 2015

Another text of ignorance and enlightenment. Jesus is on his way to the cross and the disciples are bickering over getting the good seats in heaven. For me it is as though Jesus is driving a van down the road and the disciples are seating in the seats behind having this

conversation thinking that Jesus isn't really listening. But, Jesus is just shaking his head in dismay at how they still don't get what his life and ministry is all about. They talk as though they are headed to Disney World when Jesus is headed to the cross. They are talking good times when Jesus is talking about being a servant.

We tend to give more attention to those who have more money or power (often it's both). But greatness in God's family is not measured by who has the most control over others. One of my questions for my listeners is what is it in our own lives that Jesus is shaking his head and wondering if we will ever get it. If we will ever be enlightened? I also wonder if we are the ones bickering for the good seats or are we a frustrated other disciple who is angry about the audacity of James and John to ask for the seats of honor.

47. Mark 10:35-45

Preaching date: October 18, 2015

What motivates us to follow Jesus? James and John, thought they were entitled to some kind of a special reward. After all, they had been with Jesus for three years and they listened to ALL of his sermons. For whatever reason, they think they are even more entitled than the other ten disciples. I don't know where they get the idea that they signed up for the Jesus Rewards Program.

We too live in a culture where we get rewarded for just about everything. There is even a rewards program at the local coffee house.

Jesus helps the disciples and us understand that our motivation is not some type of reward, it is the opportunity to serve with Jesus. Rewards may be nice, but Jesus sets us free to serve. When Jesus sets us free...we have the opportunity to experience the fullness of life that God intends.

48. Mark 12:38-44

Preaching date: November 8, 2015

This was a strange sermon. I noticed that the story of the "widow's mite" is the only story I could find where Jesus encounters someone in need and talks about her – but does nothing about it! And that bothers me. It bothers me a little when Jesus seemingly makes someone an object lesson as he helps them, but at least they get the help they came for. The poor woman just gets pointed out as she gives away her last money and walks away with nothing. Does Jesus help? Does he expect the disciples, who heard she was giving away her last pennies, to help?

One direction to go would be to place this in the context of Holy Week – Jesus is now tired of saving people one at a time, and turns to saving the whole world, by giving away the last of what he has to give. But I decided to engage a different side of the human condition that comes to the fore. The widow is lost in the crowd before Jesus points her out. Could the Good News be, as some have suggested, that Jesus sees the widow at all, that Jesus notices her? And what is it about human nature that is revealed by who we notice, and perhaps by our tendency to see people in aggregate, and not individually?

I took this as an invitation from Jesus to do something more basic than to help, or to change the world – the first step, the first essential step is to see – to truly see others, as Jesus saw. The Good News becomes the assurance that Jesus sees us and notices our needs – not making broad prescriptions, as we might do or might expect, but truly seeing us. The invitation to Christian witness is to reflect: who do I notice? Do I believe the generalizations, or the numbers? As Christians, might we invite the world to see the people behind the hype or the trend or the problem, and might we notice the people others look right past?

Mark 12:38-44; see Mark 13:1-8

49. Mark 13:1-8; Mark 12:38-44

Preaching date: November 15, 2015

Theme: Signs of the end Times—Do Not be Afraid

The lectionary group conversation was particularly helpful in bringing my thoughts together for preaching on the End Times. I had planned to follow the lectionary for the weeks preceding Christ the King Sunday through Christmas—and the timing of this particular text was initially going to be helpful to prepare my congregation for my tendering my resignation two weeks following this lectionary text. However, at the recommendation of my liaison in the connectional church who wanted me to give the notice two weeks earlier—that meant that this text fell on the Sunday immediately following my resignation to the Session on Tuesday evening and the subsequent all-church email to the congregation. I read and re-read the notes I had made during the lectionary group, but I leaned heavily on the Holy Spirit for the actual delivery of the message. Pastor Paul's suggestion on connection back/with the Widow's Mite was super helpful and helped with the transition to preaching about the end times. My art ministry with the immigrant women inside [detention facility] also helped to inform my preaching prep/delivery, particularly the art reflection we did called, "Ya me voy!" (Enough/already, I go!). At some point there comes a time when it is time to say, ENOUGH, I GO! As Jesus did not fix the poor widow as she gave her last mite—but he marched on to Zion to do something dramatic and transformational. At what point do you say ENOUGH to whatever broken system you find yourself (relationship, Paris tragedy, church change, etc.)? Do you opt to disappear out the back door, or do you look to find your place in the story? The options are ministry of fixing, ministry of presence, ministry of transformation. What will you choose?

50. Mark 13:1-8, Hebrews 10:11-25

Preaching date: November 15, 2015

This sermon was completely pastoral in nature, written in just one day between the Paris terrorist attacks and Sunday morning. The question became, how do we live out Jesus' call not to be alarmed in the face of apocalyptic violence, and how does that relate to faith. I tried to explore what hope looks like that is not naïve. The human condition was on everyone's mind: our susceptibility to violent action, our reactions of anger and fear. This was a sermon of exhortation: as Christians, we are not to fear death as much as our sin. We witness to our faith when we resist irrational fear. Practice "not being alarmed." Unexamined anger and fear can erode faith. We believe "the one who has promised is faithful," and so our lives of realized hope give witness to that faith.

One interesting piece I dealt with a little was the tendency toward patriotism that manifests itself at such times. I think that is a manifestation of human nature – to rally around "us," in the face of fear of "them." I wanted to honor what is good about that – unity is near the heart of the gospel. But also to push back against the darker side of this patriotic tendency – let that unity be under the banner of the reign of God, and let that unity grow in our hearts and minds to include all whom God would have it include.

51. Mark 13:1-8

Preaching date: November 15, 2015

Human condition: we look for patterns, we try to make sense or meaning out of what is around us. But sometimes we find patterns that are not really there; sometimes we infer cause and effect relationships between random or coincidental events. On the other hand we can be completely oblivious to what is staring us in the face. The disciples ask Jesus about time – Jesus has already said: the time is fulfilled the kingdom of God has drawn near. The disciples (we) fail to see Jesus even when Jesus is standing right in front of us. This articulation of the human condition comes from Jesus' reluctance to answer the disciples' questions about time. Before he answers them (not in the pericope, but later in chapter 13) Jesus needs to slow them down a bit and explain a few things. This articulation then is more a result of engaging with and interpreting

the text rather than from a close reading of the text. That we are sometimes blind to what is going on, comes from a close reading of the text and the whole of the gospel of Mark – we see stones but do not recognize the presence of God in Jesus! This is basically in continuity with my understanding of the human condition as a tension between the awareness of our finiteness and infinity, but this is a new expression of it.

This text was the appointed text for the day, but on Friday Nov 13th (days before I was to preach on this text) Paris was attacked. Apocalyptic texts were meant to bring comfort to the hearers/readers. In light of what has happened I hope this word will bring comfort. In light of the attacks, I reworked parts of my sermon, but kept the main themes I had been developing: Relax – this is not the end of the world. Bad things happen. God is not absent from the suffering we witnessed or are experiencing; trust Jesus to guide us through to the end; leave the bad guys in Jesus' hands; On the other hand pay attention to what is happening around you – even now the kingdom of God is breaking in. Don't miss it. How will the congregation respond – hard to know. I expect emotions to be running high surrounding the topic of "end times". We will end worship with Luther's great hymn: "were they to take our house, goods, goods, honor, child or spouse; though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day – the kingdom's ours forever!"

52. Luke 1:39-55

Preaching date: December 22, 2015

The story of the visitation invites reflection on the human condition in a variety of ways: the vulnerability of travel and of pregnancy, the social isolation of Mary and Elizabeth, the fragility of new life in the womb. Further, human society has made their situation more difficult: Mary and Elizabeth have both endured lowliness and disgrace (Luke 1:25). I enjoyed painting a picture of two very familiar, gifted, unique, and outstandingly faithful women, and contrasting that picture society had of them. Society asked only one thing of them: that Mary not get pregnant and the Elizabeth would – and they both failed on that one pass/fail test, and society passed judgment on them on that account.

The gospel then, is that God is at work in this welcome – not mere toleration of Mary, but a "red carpet" rolled out by Elizabeth. I told stories of modern-day pregnant teens, young gay people, others who were judged on one "pass/fail" characteristic, receiving enthusiastic welcome like Mary received. How can we, like Elizabeth, use our own experience of disgrace and being judged to reverse that experience for others in need?

Luke 3:1-6; see Malachi 3:1-4

53. Luke 5:1-11

Preaching date: June 7, 2015

Wind & Water: Going Deep – Summer Series: Wind & Water stories from gospels

Sea of Galilee/Lake Gennesaret are the same thing. Jesus interrupting people doing their normal thing and calling them into ministry. Importance of question: Have you ever considered ministry before? Jesus has no disciples at this point. He has healed Simon's mother in law, but S is not a disciple yet.

This is a fusion of other stories in other gospels: calling of first disciples, teaching at the sea from a boat, fishers of people, bursting nets. Jesus tells Simon to "go into the deep" you've been too shallow, friend. And then after that, calls him and James and John to come into the deep water of ministry. They called for partners when their nets were too heavy. The deep waters are extra satisfying. Following Jesus makes ministry/deep water less terrifying.

Disciples vs Crowds "Come and See" vs "Go and Be" Simon is obedient, declares his sinfulness and then leaves everything. What does it look like to participate FULLY in Christ's ministry? At this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus' MISSION begins. When the disciples "left everything" that included their families. This kind of faith will make you leave the things and the

people you love, in pursuit of deep waters. In pursuit of the one who you knows your own deep and calls you deeper still. 5 Observations from this story that teach us about our call/mission. Who is writing this? Who was Luke? Not an eyewitness; someone who traveled with Paul, probably on some sailing trips. Tells the story of Jesus on into the early church; probably written in the latter half of 2nd century, so over 100 years after Christ's death.

Water was such a hugely important part of Jesus' ministry; during the summer season of fun on the lake, we will explore our faith through stories about Jesus on the water. Our first "dive" begins with Jesus calling the first disciples. Come to the waters, and see what fishing has to teach us about discipleship. The church will do anything to get butts in seats. I remember in seminary, marveling at all the things our internship sites were doing to get young families (the holy grail of churches) into the pews. We joked that our last resort would be to park a van on the side of the road that said "Free Candy" and hang a fishing pole out the side to lure children and their parents into ministry. I don't think this is what Jesus had in mind when he called Simon and James and Andrew away from their boats to "fish for people."

54. Luke 21:25-36

Preaching date: November 29, 2015

This was a three-point sermon based on an insight Rolf Jacobson passed along on *Working Preacher* in his article for the appointed Psalm for this Sunday: Advent is meeting Christ in past history, present mystery, and future majesty.

The interesting connections to the human experience were two. One was exploring how we experience expectation – how it usually trips us up, as it does every year in the lead-up to Christmas. We create an unattainable vision of the future – usually playing out our disappointments from the past – and when it becomes present and unrealized, we despair. Repeat. How does the practice of Advent and how do these texts invite us into a different experience of expectation that doesn't perpetuate a cycle of disappointment? The second was the acknowledgement of our tendency to "live in the moment" in the worst way, losing all perspective of how all things are connected. Spending time with past/present/future, history/mystery/majesty, "the one who was, and who is, and who is to come" draws us into a richer, fuller, and more faithful view of any part of that whole, and above all, of the present moment.

55. John 1:1-18

Preaching date: July 26, 2015

The human condition that came to me in my preparation is the important reality that Jesus has come to live among us. We are not alone in our sin and brokenness. Christ is with us and Christ wants to heal our todays and bring hope to the world.

The sermon was shaped by meditating on Jesus who moved in. Many of the listeners may believe this, but I will work at getting them to identify areas in which Jesus has moved into their lives.

56. John 2:1-11

Preaching date: August 2, 2015

The human condition that was evident this week was the importance of relationships and community celebrations. This was Jesus' first recorded miracle (sign) in John and it was interesting that Jesus chose (or was pressed into) to perform a miracle in this setting. This passage also spoke to me about the importance of human choice. The choice that was given the servants was to listen to or reject the instructions of Jesus. A point that came to me was not only did the servants listen, they followed the instructions exactly (they filled the jars to the brim).

The thrust of the sermon was to talk about grace after grace. The abundance of wine was about see what grace looked like. I also stressed the importance of obedience to realize Christ's abundance.

57. John 6:1-21

Preaching date: July 26, 2015

Over the years I have grown weary of tackling John 6 for several weeks in a row. Part of this is finding new ways to talk about bread as well as the frustration of not having consistent attendance so it is a challenge to necessarily build on the bread of life theme. But my weariness also challenges my needing to look deeper into the passage and into new resources. It could be that bringing fresh ideas to a story that is well known is a challenge even when I am new to this setting.

So, without sharing my weariness with my listeners, it is clear that God is able to do so much more with what we assume is very few resources. Here at [congregation] we have just begun housing the Flood Relief lunches. The questions have been do we have enough people, can we really handle it? They sound disciple-ish – pointing out the meager but God has provided and invited us as a community to open our doors to those who need lunches but also to those who have time to help out but not connected into our faith community. The human condition is “not enough” when God says “plenty”.

58. John 6:1-21

Preaching date: July 26, 2015

The human conditions suggested by this story include: We human beings get hungry on a regular basis. We worry about having enough. Keeping enough on hand is an on-going struggle. Being ready to feed others is an added dimension. We worry if there will be enough for us as well as others. These are mostly value-neutral statements that just describe what it is like to be human, so I expect people will relate to them, especially those who deal with food and food preparation at home and at church and in other venues.

The human condition is apparent in the narrative, and especially in Jesus' conversation with the disciples. I don't think it is new in itself, but I'm not sure how many sermons set their foundation on the human experience at such a basic and mundane level.

The good news begins at a very basic level as well – Jesus understands how persistent our needs are and how daunting it is to try to meet the needs of others. Jesus understands. He gave us this sign to encourage us to dare to think there will be enough, when we try to follow him in his ministry of feeding. That good news progresses to proclaiming we have a God who cares about human needs (none too mundane), blesses us when we try to meet others' needs, and sees to all our own needs.

Since the articulation of the human condition is so simple and close to everyday life, I think people will accept it, and will be interested to hear how God's action and concerns are so “close to home.”

John 6:56-69; see Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

59. John 6:56-69 [For sermon manuscript and listener feedback, see Appendix E, Case Study 3]

Preaching date: August 23, 2015

We are all in need of having things our way and for things to follow the plan we have set forth in our minds. As I read this text and prepared for the sermon, I saw myself in those disciples that heard what Jesus was saying and then just walked away. It wasn't how I wanted it. It wasn't the plan I had for life. This can't be the way it is supposed to be. Then I pondered what made the 12 different? When Jesus saw those leaving He asked the 12 if they too wanted to go. And Peter

even though he is a royal screw up said, “Lord where can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” And there is the difference. Peter and the 11 were cross eyed. They knew where to look. It wasn’t that they got it, or that they understood, or that they liked the plan, but they were focused on Jesus. This resonated with me personally, because I was focused on God during my last call process. The world wanted me to walk away, but I was focused on Jesus and where He was calling me. I didn’t get it, I didn’t understand it, but was looking at Jesus.

I will preach this sermon from a very personal place. And my experience will be a real life example to the people who hear it about holding on to Jesus and being focused on Him.

60. John 11:32-44

Preaching date: November 1, 2015

In the sermon I intend to deal with the loss that we experience through death. Mary and Martha grieve when their brother dies and so does Jesus. Death appears as the enemy. No matter who we are, we will die. Jesus moves us from the pain of death (and even the fear of death) to see the promises of God.

My Outline

Page One: (Death hurts) I make the point that death was very much a part of Jesus’ world. Death was especially hard on women who lost a husband, a brother or a son who supported them. Mary says to Jesus, “Lord, if you have been here my brother would not have died.”

Page Two: Death hurts us. I talk about all the signs of death around us. I mention the car plowing into a crowd at the Oklahoma State homecoming parade. Many of the members of the church have lost loved ones since last All Saints Day. Perhaps they pray what Mary said, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.”

Page Three: Jesus gives life. He calls Lazarus back to life. Still Lazarus, Mary and Martha will still die. But, perhaps Jesus points to that time when they will hear that commanding voice and as they come out they will see the glory of God.

Page Four: Jesus gives us life. Many church members over the years have told me that when they were with their loved one at the time of death they experienced a sense of calm and peace. Sometimes that calm and peace did not come until later. I wonder if that calm and peace, God’s way of letting us know that our loved one heard the commanding voice and now experiences the glory of God.

Following the sermon, family members will light a candle for their loved ones that have died during the year.

61. John 11:32-44, Revelation 21:1-6 [For sermon manuscript and listener feedback, see Appendix E, Case Study 8]

Preaching date: November 1, 2015

In thinking about how Mary and Martha experienced what Jesus did, I realized that he was disrupting any closure they had gotten about Lazarus’ death. So, is closure good or bad? It is clearly good, and part of the comfort God gives. Yet, it isn’t all of what God has in mind – resurrection is a hope beyond closure that we see played out in the life of Jesus. I formulated the idea that human nature is to seek closure as the best we can do. We make a truce with death. God, however, is not satisfied with that arrangement, not party to that truce, and promises resurrection. We can have hope beyond our mere closure.

I think we can all relate to the need for closure and the difficulty of finding it – we all wonder, is there something I could have done, etc. Sometimes, though, finding closure can mean losing hope in God’s new creation – it can be “settling.” Jesus is willing to disrupt the temporary good of closure to bring us to the greater goods of hope and restoration.

62. John 11:32-44, Revelation 21:1-6

Preaching date: November 1, 2015

Despair and hope. We all know both despair and hope. We all understand the pain of death when someone dies. Is there comfort in knowing that Jesus understands and feels pain at the death of Lazarus?

I love preaching for All Saints Day. I like to think of it as a day of holy remembering as we hold the tension between grief and gratitude. I can be easily distracted by things like a stinky Lazarus coming out of the tomb after four days of death. This is especially true the morning after Halloween and lots of talk about Zombies. I also know that many of us are trying to sort out and make sense of another heavy rainfall and more flooding. I think for me in this setting this is about embracing fear, doubt and despair knowing of God's great love, hope and promise. We can look forward with the writer of Revelation 21 and someday too say, it is done. I have used that passage many times in preaching at funerals and difficult events when we need to cling to hope that there will be a day when tears will be no more. To cling to the promise that these words are trustworthy and true. I think most of my listeners know this in their heads but need a chance to hear and be reminded of it.

63. John 14:15-21

Preaching date: August 23, 2015

The articulation of the human condition that emerged from my preaching preparation is the general worth of human beings. Jesus stresses the command to love one another at the beginning of this passage. This love has been displayed by God who makes it possible to be in relationship with God and God's son Jesus. Humans are worthy of being loved. This love is rewarded and enabled by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This love is fully displayed by the intimate love that Jesus discusses in verse 20. We see that Jesus is in God and that we are in Jesus and Jesus is in us. This passage shows us a God that puts a premium on relationships and not just commands. This passage caused me to think anew about the relationship that is possible between humans and God.

The sermon was shaped by a positive regard for the relationship between humans and God. Humans are called not only to love, but to be in relationship with God and in fact to spread that relationship to others. In the sermon I never used the phrase the human condition, but the precious nature of a divine/human relationship and human worth was constantly placed in front of the congregation. Many in the congregation have heard about the negative aspects of the human condition and so it will take effort to persuade that they are worthy of God's love and are able to spread that love to others.

64. John 15:9-17

Preaching date: May 10, 2015

I guess what is novel about this sermon is that I am not dwelling a lot on human sinfulness. I am addressing the human condition as something positive – the focus is on redeemed humanity, not fallen humanity. The gist of how the human condition is articulated is basically to say, in experiencing friendship, we are glimpsing redeemed humanity. Friendship is voluntarily (there are no have-tos in friendship), mutual, and egalitarian, and it often brings out the best in us. In seeing and experiencing friendship, we are seeing and experiencing humanity as it was meant to be, and as it will be in the fulfillment of all things. All this reflection arose simply from Jesus using the word "friends" for his disciples, and unpacking that image a little bit in the surrounding verses, such as saying that servants don't necessarily understand what their master is doing, but friends do know each other, each other's motivations and inner life.

The gospel has already begun in that picture of redeemed humanity, but the sermon will go one step further, and talk about friendship with God; that our God is always seeking partner people, and in Christ has reached out to humanity as friends. I hope and expect that this will resonate with nearly everyone, having experienced the blessing of friendship at some point in

their lives. If they can't relate at all, then surely they have felt the longing for a friend, and can attach to the truth that God reaches out to us in friendship. It certainly resonates with my experience.

John 17:6-19; see Acts 1:15-26

65. John 18:33-37

Preaching date: November 22, 2015

This became a sermon of contrast between the kingdoms of this world, and the kingdom of Jesus. "My kingdom is not from this world..." Jesus' kingdom cannot be understood from the perspective of the kingdoms of this world.

It was interesting to compile the characteristics of the kingdoms of this world: no truth but power, expediency, deal-making, saving face, projecting an image, climbing and striving, power structures, threat of coercion, ambition for self over others, fear as means to control, terror maintaining the illusion of peace, sowing division, freedom in exchange for something (and so not true freedom). I got a bunch of these contrasts from Jaime Clark-Soles' article from November 2012 on *Working Preacher*.

The challenges were: encouraging people to see the sinful corruption of human nature at a higher level than individual morality, and helping people to see the kingdoms of this world in more subtle, hidden, and, to us, conventional forms than they were in the days of Pontius Pilate. I think the present presidential campaign may give some credence to these claims, as we get to see raw ambition on display a little more blatantly than at some other times.

The gospel was getting to proclaim that Jesus' kingdom was the exact opposite of every characteristic listed above for the kingdoms of this world. The way forward for Christians is to figure out how to live and serve in the world as it is without coming to assume that God works the same way; living out the belief that God's kingdom isn't from this world, but is for this world.

66. John 20:11-18

Preaching date: September 6, 2015

The human need that came from my preparation was the need of comfort and also of true belief. Comfort, because all of us at some time are in the place of grief and need the comfort of someone else to help us to see straight. True belief, in that I discovered from Professor Lewis' book on John that believe is not just seeing. True belief in John is seeing and telling others. Mary was the first true Christian believer because she went to the disciples after she had seen Jesus and told them. Mary Magdalene is a true evangelist. I do find this understanding of the human condition to be in continuity with what I already believe.

The sermon was entitled, Have you seen Jesus? In the sermon it was relayed that Mary did not see what was right in front of her. I then moved on to explain that there are many things that get in our way and make it very hard to see what is in front of us. We need Jesus to meet us in this place. However, I moved on from there and said that once we have seen Jesus we need to tell others. Basically the sermon was from comfort to comforting others. This understanding of the human condition will be implied and I expect most listeners to accept it as true.

67. John 21:1-14

Preaching date: July 19, .2015

Wind & Water: Breakfast on the Beach

"Clear Eyes, full hearts, can't lose." —Friday Night Lights. Not sure how this ties in yet, but it feels like it does maybe. The disciples are witnessing a victory, experiencing it for their own team. Full nets. Abundance. Signs that all is not lost. Looking for our own signs of abundance. Out fishing for something, seeking. Showing up together and wondering what will come of it? The disciples wanted to catch some fish, gave them something to do in their grief and

confusion. Tell a story of grief, of death, of losing. This story is an epilogue to the gospel of John, to the resurrection narrative. Fishing = symbolic of their old vocation, but also role of gathering disciples.

68. Acts 1:15-26, John 17:6-19, Psalm 55

Preaching date: May 17, 2015

The experience of betrayal is a universal human experience. There is pain associated with betrayals we have experienced, vulnerability associated with our fears of being betrayed, and perhaps guilt connected with our sense that we have betrayed others. The cues in the text were both the narrative of having to replace Judas among the Apostles (Acts) and Jesus' words in John 17, "except the one destined to be lost..." his reference to Judas. Often when we talk about Judas, we speak only of the necessity of his betrayal in the unfolding of the passion – sometimes even seeming to speak of it as a cosmic necessity. I wanted to humanize Judas to the point where we could all recognize him in ourselves, in others, and in our potential selves. What I have discovered in my reflection is the universality of this experience, and its ties to our own fears, vulnerabilities, pain, and guilt. I'm not sure I've heard a sermon on betrayal before. I'm sure this preaching was affected by having prayed Psalm 55 with several people through the years, including an abandoned wife not that long before.

The good news doesn't undo what Judas did, or undo what we have done or experienced of betrayal. I took two approaches to good news: one is to say that though betrayal is very real, it doesn't have to be a permanent and defining reality as it was in the life of Judas – I alluded to the counter-example of Paul who went from a betrayer of Christ to an Apostle. The other approach to the gospel was to hear Jesus' words about unity – that unity among the believers is the antidote to betrayal being a permanent and defining part of our identity and the dead-end of our relationships. I found this a very creative process resulting in a sermon that rang true to me, both in telling the truth and reassuring me. I expect most listeners will relate without much persuasion. Interestingly, I think that there are "betrayers" in many of our lives that we still wish well and even love, so people might appreciate the implied permission not to hate Judas.

69. Acts 2:1-21, Ezekiel 37:1-14

Preaching date: May 24, 2015

I think we all worry about having a future, and, if we can imagine a future, it involves a complete cut-off from what has come before. We had two baptisms that day, a 2-year-old and a 19-year-old, and I found myself struggling to talk about what is happening to them. Our language about baptism is inadequate; either it minimizes the transformation, or it denigrates God's children who are not yet baptized. The section on baptism really arose from the situation in the life of the church, but the section on resurrection arose pretty obviously from Ezekiel's vision of the resurrection, and the section on church life arose from the narrative in Acts 2, or actually primarily in the narrative leading up to Acts 2, when the disciples are a small and disheartened band, with a rich history in shared experience, but no clear future. Acts 2 depicts the Spirit's answer to that situation.

My refrain was: "Who you have been, by the power of God's Spirit, has a future." The good news, in some sense, is transformation – that change is possible, even radical change, without having to destroy us or renounce who we have been, etc. In this case, the human condition was implied in this statement of the gospel. The shape of the sermon was to move through several examples and apply this gospel statement: resurrection of the body, baptism, church life. This is an interesting case where I think people will be willing to accept this gospel statement, but struggle a little as we work out the implications of it. That working out of the implications might be a working backwards to the human condition. I.e. the people will readily accept the gospel of resurrection, but working out the implications will involve acknowledging

death! Again, in talking about church life – “the church has a future.” “yea!” But now let’s talk about all that is wrong, dead-end, about the church’s life, apart from and without the Spirit’s transformation.

The section about Baptism was different. Here the working out of the implications was to say, what has come before in the life of this girl and this woman contains much good. They are already God’s beloved people, made in God’s image, full of giftedness and potential. And baptism, then, is about that goodness having a future.

70. Acts 9:36-42

Preaching date: August 2, 2015

The words, “and then he knelt down and prayed,” are easy to miss if we read this passage too quickly. Kneeling doesn’t always come naturally for us. Kneeling is an act of humility. God’s good work should lead to a life of servanthood. We follow one who served. There’s often a tendency to think or believe that nothing in our world will change if/when we kneel. This arose more through the interpretation/engagement process. Peter and Tabitha both stepped out in faith. Therefore, God’s good work was accomplished. They didn’t accomplish what they did in their own power. We can’t either. A new or fresh perspective about charity surfaced during my preparation – see below.

Tabitha took care of those in need. Peter heard the cries of the weeping widows. God’s goodness often comes to us through the good works of other people. If we have faith, hope, and love; along with the courage to care and humility to pray, things can and will change. I will emphasize the fact that Tabitha was devoted to good works and acts of charity. Charity is not just giving a small donation to a cause, but in Christian terms it involves esteem, affection, and caring that reflect God’s self-giving love. Clearly the impact of Tabitha’s kindness was that other people were helped. She felt good knowing she was making a difference and the kingdom of God grew as a result. Good works and charity aren’t done only with money – it can be with our words, our time, and our help to our family or neighbors. Tabitha stepped out in faith and impacted a whole community.

Acts 17: 22-28; see Genesis 11: 1-9

71. Romans 5:1-11

Preaching date: October 25, 2015

Theme: What does grace look like?

The preaching/sermon follows the presbytery meeting which had much discussion and voting relating to [large city congregation] and their out-of-order in-house procedures to vote to leave the PCUSA over the “issue” of homosexuality (ordaining persons in same gender relationships and also allowing the marriage of same gender couples). The church had broken the PCUSA polity in numerous ways to make their own way out of the denomination. It was hurtful to many and there was much discussion on the presbytery floor. I had not planned to preach on this “issue” per se, but following the meeting it seemed inappropriate not to embrace the concerns biblically and theologically and pastorally. The striking contrast came with a 110-year-old church in [small town] which has 20 members and continues to be very active in ministry, mission, and the life of the connectional/bigger church.

My conversation partner was Barth and his commentary on Romans. Short notes follow: Barth, Karl. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns. London: Oxford University Press, 1933, 1968.

The theme of *The Epistle to the Romans* is that God’s righteousness is visible where the faithfulness of God encounters the fidelity of humans. Barth defines grace as the “incomprehensible fact” that God is delighted with humans who have the opportunity to “rejoin in God” through the “incomprehensible grace” of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is not the “door” to

truth, a truth among all truths. Rather, it is the “hinge” that acts as the “question-mark against all truths.” (35) Grace exists only where the Resurrection is reflected, the event in history which illustrates the power and the righteousness of God. The Gospel, the “power of God unto salvation,” is the meaning of history and the redemption of all creation, but believers must make the free choice between the “scandal” [of the cross] and faith. This choice confronts believers “always and everywhere and at every moment.” (39) Response in faith also is grace, what Barth calls “the power of obedience” which also is a “categorical imperative” because it is an order “which cannot be disobeyed.” (207) Grace also is knowledge of the will of God and includes the “willing of the will of God.” (207) Barth argues that this incomprehensible grace requires a free choice, (39) and that faith is a miracle; otherwise it is not faith. (366) Humans who are under grace are the “objective to its attack” from which there is no escape or option to stand aside as spectators. Barth uses the language for election and predestination without employing the actual terms. (216) Grace is the KRISIS (judgment) from death to life. (225) Christ also is the KRISIS (judgment) of humanity’s freedom and detachment. Christ makes the strong to be strong to the glory of God, but he also leads humans to the weak for the glory of God. (526) Barth sees the role of the church as being a continuing witness to the hope that is Jesus Christ, “for if hope be hope, it must continue to burn after it has put out every false hope.” (390) The “divine possibility” of grace in Christ cannot be apprehended except in the “catastrophe of that human possibility which is the church.” (392) Incomprehensible grace, witnessed to the world through the church, embraced by people through the miracle of faith, must produce changed human behavior, what Barth calls “the great disturbance,” for human action must “inevitably be disturbed by the thought of God.” (424) The world is “one great, unsolved enigma” and Christ, the mercy of God, provides the only answer. (427)

Emphasis—reflects Barth: The “divine possibility” of grace in Christ cannot be understood except through the “catastrophe of that human possibility” which is the church. WE are the church. What does grace look like? The little church in [small town] that has worked through many theological changes in 110 years and remained connected to the bigger church, or the big church in [city] that throws its weight around and makes its own rules to get its way and leave when/how it desires? The question isn’t so much homosexuality and its impact on the church but what does grace look like in our lives when we are not getting our way; when we have the minority view or the underdog view or we flat just don’t agree? Do we stay at the table with grace, or do we slam the door and leave?

Ultimately Barth: Human behavior must be disturbed by the very thought of God; disturbed and inspired to a grace-filled response.

72. II Corinthians 12:2-10

Preaching date: July 5, 2015

This sermon is an attempt to take on two related aspects of the human condition: our desire for, and simultaneous ambivalence about miracles and what may be the underlying reason for that desire and ambivalence: the more we believe in the power of God to do miracles, the more we wonder why we aren’t getting the ones we ask for. This arose from Paul’s narrative of his own experiences: first, a profound spiritual experience that he doesn’t claim to fully understand (“*God knows* what was really happening!” he says), and then another, even more profound experience of wanting God’s intervention with his “thorn in the flesh” and not getting it. This sermon is all about those tensions – even paradoxes.

I think this situation had people’s attention, from those who love to speak of miracles and read about them and pray for them but are bothered because they sometimes don’t get them, to those who pooh-pooh miracles stories but feel kind of bad about that and wonder which stories of Jesus they really believe and if not then why do they keep coming back. We all find ourselves on those spectrums somewhere: from believing in miracles naively to maybe wishing we could, from wanting to prove miracles because we secretly have trouble believing them to not wanting to

prove miracles because we secretly have trouble believing them, etc. I don't think I will have to persuade anyone, just flesh out the options and contradictions, and they will recognize themselves somewhere in it.

The proclamation of the gospel is a simple fleshing out of the message to Paul. I really want people to come away with those words written on their hearts: "my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness." The gospel, in the end, is, yes God is powerful, but there is a deeper power we meet in the weakness of Christ on the cross and the crucified Jesus meeting us in our weakness – an articulation of the theology of the cross.

73. II Corinthians 12:2-10

Preaching date: July 5, 2015

The Apostle Paul wrote about his thorn in the flesh, the agent of Satan who has come to torment him....I talked about those thorns in the flesh that we have that distract us and keeps us from experiencing all that God offers. Such as health issues, personality issues, national and world issues. Like Paul (the Apostle), we pray for God to remove these so that we can do more for God.

I compared the Apostle Paul's experience to our experience. Paul's thorn to our thorn, Paul's experience of grace and our experience of grace. Rather than trying to persuade anyone to do or think anything, I tried to help the congregation experience grace.

74. II Corinthians 12:2-10

Preaching date: July 5, 2015

My theme for the sermon was "God gives strength." I came to this theme as result of studying the text. The need, or human condition, I talked about was weakness – both how we fear letting it be seen and how we believe we have to compensate for it ourselves. In other words, we think we have to be strong on our own. We also live in a culture that seeks to provide lots of answers and ways we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. But these ways are empty. Even some of the religious messages we hear tell us it is all up to us. The new super-apostle is the televangelist who says if we just believe enough, pray enough, or give enough that we can change our situations. But Paul reveals something different in this text. He says, "Whenever I am weak, then I am strong." He reveals that our only hope for real strength is a deeper dependence on God.

I think I clearly stated my understanding of the human condition in the sermon. I attempted to paint a picture of it in ways that they can easily understand. I would say that this most definitely resonates with my own experience. I know that I have a great temptation to believe that the viability of the parish, the needs of the people, and the people's spiritual growth rests solely on me because I am the rector. But that is simply not true. I too am dependent of God. And it does not really matter how talented, creative, spiritual, or strong I am personally. It is only God's grace and God's Spirit working in the congregation that makes the difference. I regularly need to remind myself, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor 12: 9). I suspect that most of my listeners will agree with me on this topic. I think for many of them this will be more of a reminder. But it is a reminder that will be life giving.

75. Ephesians 1:3-14

Preaching date: July 12, 2015

I found that I really struggled with this sermon from Ephesians. I found it difficult to find the trouble in the text. The author piles up all the blessings God has given us in Christ – redemption, election, forgiveness, adoption, a future, etc. These come one after the other. I decided after many false starts to say that the blessings themselves were the trouble. Not that we have been blessed, but that we don't really understand that blessings of God. First, we think we need to earn them. This is the classic works/faith argument. Secondly, we think we need to search for them. I believe the author of the text is refuting the claims of Gnosticism here. So in my

sermon I argued that sometimes blessings need to be explained. I then suggested that the key verse for this pericope was verse 12, “So that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.” I argued in my sermon that the point was not to just list these blessings and then be thankful (although that is part of our response). Rather, the point is that God transforms us through these blessings. God makes us a blessing (that was my theme sentence).

I clearly stated the different ways that we misunderstand the blessings of God. I presented the idea that some believe they must earn this from God. I connected this to those who would tell the Ephesians that they must first be circumcised. I also presented the idea of needing to search for blessings. I explained that God chooses to reveal God’s self to us (vs. 9).

There was one section of the sermon I was a bit concerned people would not accept. I talked about the difference between being lucky and being blessed. I said some people are lucky, but all are blessed. The blessings of God are not having material possessions, or even good health, or wealth. If we believe that then we must say that God blesses some while leaving others to live in misery. Some are lucky, but all are blessed. The real blessings of God are what God has done for us in Christ. And these blessings transform us so that we can be a blessing to others.

After preaching the sermon I did have a few comments about the lucky/blessed comment. I did not hear anyone say they disagreed with me.

76. Ephesians 4:1-16

Preaching date: August 2, 2015

For this sermon I wanted to talk about church growth. I wanted to establish that today we think of church growth in terms of numbers. We think about more people, more money, more programs, and more clergy. But that is not what the author of Ephesians (who I call Paul for simplicity sake) has in mind. Paul is interested in the members of the church growing spiritually. He wants them to grow into the full stature of Christ. This kind of growth is only possible in the community of the church. Fellow Christians are essential to the project. So in a sense, I guess the human condition I was addressing was our tendency to remain isolated. For many the Christian faith is an individual journey. But Paul indicates that we need one another because we are each gifted and because we help each other become more like Christ as we bear with one another in love.

In this particular sermon I did not use the Four Pages method. I could not make it fit. I also do not think that I explicitly stated the human condition I wanted to address. I certainly talked about our need to be in community. I talked about our need for one another to challenge each other and equip one another for ministry. I just did not explicitly state that we usually prefer isolation.

I think that the congregation accepted what I was trying to say. Many members of the parish talked to me about the sermon after worship and commented on how meaningful it was to them. They said that it really made them think about the priorities of the church and in particular what it meant to grow.

77. Ephesians 4:1-6; 11-16

Preaching date: July 30 and August 2, 2015

Theme : God give us the gifts we need. The need that I addressed was our sense of not having enough. This is pretty easy for people to understand, especially in the summer months when overall giving to the church tends to fall behind. Our need is a willingness to trust God. I talked about the tendency (temptation) to focus on what we lack than on what we have.

Page One (the church in Ephesus needs more gifts)

Page Two (we need more gifts)

Page Three (God gives the church in Ephesus what they need)

Page Four (God gives us what we need)

For me, the human need serves as a starting point—we need more gifts. I have experienced this need in every church I have served. Yes, I assume that most in the congregation accept it as true. I often hear them state it clearly.

I shared a story about the St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Omaha, Nebraska. This congregation was in a bad way. It was a neighborhood locked in poverty created by the effects of a major freeway slicing through the city. But this congregation had a number of teachers and they started a tutoring program for a nearby high school. Over several years, they helped more than two thousand students and made a huge impact of the effectiveness of the high school. Today St. Luke's is a thriving congregation. God gives us what we need.

78. Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Preaching date: August 9, 2015

This sermon continued my sermon series from Ephesians. The epistle is about the church. The first half of the book is about God's gracious actions in forming the church. The second half of the book contains ethical imperatives revealing what life should look like in response to God's actions. I struggled with this text because I wanted to still focus on God's actions. I feared it would be easy to accidentally make it sound like the members of the church now needed to shoulder the full responsibility of life change. So the theme of the sermon was "God Shapes the Church."

I presented two issues that I felt reflected the human condition. First, the church is at times desperately out of shape. Second, we feel like we must whip ourselves into shape. The behaviors listed by the author showed just how out of shape the Ephesians were. These include lying, stealing, anger, gossip, slander, malice, bitterness, and wrath. I talked about the alternatives offered and the underlying motivations for those alternatives.

Regarding the second point, I talked about how these behaviors could be considered spiritual disciplines. They are means to an end. They are not necessarily the point in and of themselves. As we speak truth, forgive others, care for the needy, and are kind to others we are transformed. God shapes us into the people God longs for us to be. Our lives begin to reflect the life of Christ.

By focusing on what God is doing in our lives as we live these ways I was able to both lift up the human condition and remain focused on God's grace.

The human condition was explicitly stated in this sermon. It guided the way I addressed topic. I did that because I wanted to make sure the focus was on grace, not our attempts to change ourselves. I do believe that people accepted this message. I think it provides a more hopeful approach to this section of Ephesians. We can seek to live in the ways listed here knowing that God is doing something in our lives as we do.

79. Ephesians 5:15-20

Preaching date: August 16, 2015

The focus of this sermon was Paul's exhortation to "make the most of the time" found in verse 16. I explained the unique nature of the Greek used here which is obscured in the English translation. Paul is asking the reader to snap up every opportunity like it is a bargain. He wants the Ephesians, and us, to use every opportunity we have to live out and share the gospel. Paul uses language of wisdom and folly so important to both Gentiles and Jews alike. I lifted up the section about not being drunk. I suggested that Paul is objecting not to alcohol use but rather to anything that anesthetizes the believer to the needs of the world. If we have numbed ourselves we cannot make the most of the time. The alternative is being Spirit-filled. I suggested that this is ongoing process. It begins in baptism (we had two baptisms this day) and continues throughout our lives. We are filled by the Spirit in the church as we gather to sing, worship, and offer our thanksgiving (Eucharist) to God.

I understood the human condition as our tendency to use our time frivolously. We fail to pay attention to the will of God (v. 17) and concern ourselves with our own needs. In some sense, this is like allowing ourselves to be drunk rather than filled with the Spirit.

In this sermon I don't think I explicitly named the human condition. It was implied that not making the most of the time was foolishness. I believe that most members of the parish resonated with the idea that we only have so much time and we need to use it wisely. I hope they understood that Paul was concerned more with how people were using their time rather than how much time one may or may not have. Ephesians is not apocalyptic in its understanding of time. Rather, this is realized eschatology at its finest. I certainly did not use any of those words in the sermon but still tried very hard to communicate this idea.

My theme sentence for this sermon was "God gives us purpose." I did not follow the four pages format for the sermon in this instance. I have not done so for the past few sermons as I am having some difficulty finding ways to make that form work with Ephesians.

Philippians 2:6-11; see Mark 8:27-38

80. II Timothy 4:6-8, Psalm 121, Revelation 21

Preaching date: September 14, 2015

Funeral Sermon

Death is something all of us face. Death is a mystery, and isn't something we look forward to. It is a privilege to walk with a family at the end of this time here and the passing onto the next portion of eternal life. The thing that I know for certain about death is that none of us understand it, and we all try to help others not be so worried or fearful of it, and to not lose ourselves at the loss of a loved one.

My sermon spoke about the understanding that death is a mystery that we do not understand, but yet to say that we do not understand it, is not to say that Christ and God do not understand it. Death is a mystery only to us, but those of us with faith, need not worry about what is on the other side of that door labeled death, because the one thing that is there is God and He has promised to always be with us and to wipe away every tear! We do not need to understand death, to know that the promise of resurrection is true.

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; see Mark 10:2-16

81. Hebrews 1:1-4

Preaching date: August 9, 2015

God offers us the gift of freedom but we don't/can't hear God speak. Jesus is God's communication strategy yet we ignore his plea to come home. On many levels we've made it more difficult to hear God speak. We've surrounded ourselves by so much noise and images. Most of the advertising we've created is so sad and superficial. We need to consider how we might take that means of communication and turn it into something good to bring peace.

Most of this sermon involved retelling a story that Jose Miguel Sokoloff shared about the civil war in Columbia and how the government began renewed efforts to get a grip on things by incorporating a variety of new communication strategies. The good news is that we have nothing to fear because Jesus came to save not to condemn. God will stop at nothing to save us. I ended by persuading people to come home or invite someone to come home.

82. Hebrews 2:10-19

Preaching date: August 16, 2015

This text brought to mind just how comfortable we tend to get with the way things are. This came more to the forefront as I reflected on the text and spent time in study. The congregation this letter was written to had become stagnant and indifferent toward the gospel.

We're no different than the people this letter was written to. This letter could be written to many congregations today.

Claiming Jesus as our pioneer has implications for us as well. This image suggests, perhaps even demands, an openness to change. It suggests that Jesus was bold and courageous. It also suggests that we're following a person who went in a direction that others weren't taking. Following someone like this is good news. It means Jesus goes before us and doesn't ask us to go places he wasn't willing to go or do things he wasn't willing to do himself. It will probably require persuading people to get in touch with Jesus the pioneer.

83. Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Preaching date: August 23, 2015

We need a high priest because we are sinful. Our natural inclination is to hide behind a mask because we don't want God or others to see the "real" us. There are even some churches that encourage this kind of behavior. There isn't really anything new about this.

In the sermon people will be presented with two choices – to continue pretending or to take off the mask and be real. The good news is that if we choose to take off the mask we have a high priest who understands because he was human. He was one of us. Our priest knew what it was like to be weak. Therefore, he deals gently and kindly with us. Our high priest also invites us to come just as we are. We no longer have to pretend. Some will accept this, while others (especially those of us who cling to our masks) will need some persuading.

84. Hebrews 4:14-5:14

Preaching date: August 2, 2015

Buddhism: Compassion and Nirvana

What articulation of the human condition or theological anthropology has emerged from your preaching preparation? The need to receive and to give compassion. Also, we know compassion because of the Incarnation; Emmanuel; Jesus did not run away from the sinfulness of humanity but embraced it/lived it/bore it so that through his DBR he might overcome and transform it. How did it arise – from a close reading of text itself, or in the process of engaging with the text and interpreting it? Sermon prep and reading Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics. Do you find this understanding of the human condition to be essentially in continuity with what you already believed? The epiphany is more with the similarity of other world religions and how they are expressions of the human condition. The particular religious expression differs, but the core human condition and need for God remains the consistent theme. Is there something fresh or novel about it? My point of reference for preaching theme comes from Barth, Dogmatics: "We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling (συμπαθεῖν μὴ δυνάμενον) of our infirmities, but was tempted in all things like as we are (κατὰ πάντα καθ' ὁμοιότητα), yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15), who "can have compassion" (μετριοπαθεῖν δυνάμενος) on the ignorant and them that are out of the way, for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity, and by reason thereof he ought (δι' αὐτὴν ὀφείλει), as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins" (Heb. 5:2f.).

Note: it is here that we find ourselves at the point at which the biblical doctrine of the incarnation of the Word and the familiar parallels in the history of religions part company. There are also incarnations of Isis and Osiris; there is an incarnation in Buddha and in Zoroaster. But it is only the New Testament that says "he hath made him to be sin" and "he became a curse for us." Only here do we have so strict a concept of Emmanuel, of revelation and reconciliation. We must pay all the more attention to the fact that the New Testament does say this, that it speaks of this divine solidarity and necessary association with man. To deviate from this, to try to make God's becoming flesh merely a becoming man or even a hero, is to descend to the level of the religions: they can all do this." (Barth, Dogmatics, I.2, p. 145)

How will this understanding shape the sermon? The very idea of “Emmanuel” must reshape our lives—not for the obligatory sake of helping oneself of pointing to Jesus to save others. The concept of Emmanuel is an invitation to live a life of compassion and gratitude. How will this understanding affect the way the good news is proclaimed? That it is, in fact, Good News; Good News worth reorienting one’s life around even (and especially) when it is a little inconvenient to do so. Will the understanding of the human condition be stated or implied? Always stated; never implied. Does it resonate with your experience? Yes, Will you assume that all or most listeners will accept it as true, or do you plan to try to persuade them of it? Assuming is risky in any venue, but here it is definitely safe to assume that yes we do need God in our lives. A point of comparison between Buddhism and Christianity will be the Noble Eightfold Path compared to traditional spiritual disciplines. (The Noble Eightfold Path: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Concentration, Right Mindfulness)

85. Hebrews 9:1-14

Preaching date: August 30, 2015

We have open access to God through Jesus Christ, but we often put up barriers when it comes to others accessing God. It arose from a close reading of the text, as well as through further study. This is what I believe. However, I developed a new appreciation for the barriers (based on the sacrificial system and design of the temple) that existed in the original context, as well as how some of them still exist today.

I read the scripture from inside of a tent and talked about the barrier that it created. I also shared some information about the design of the temple and the sacrificial system that tended to create barriers, though perhaps not intentionally. The ways we create barriers with God and others were stated emphatically. The good news is that Jesus’ sacrifice removed all the barriers once and for all. God gives us the option to choose freely. I reminded them that they have a choice and encouraged them to choose life by leaving the barriers behind.

Hebrews 10:11-25; see Mark 13:1-8

86. Hebrews 11 (and The Lord’s Prayer)

Preaching date: October 18, 2015

Theme: Eschatology

As I prepare for preaching on hope, I am mentally reviewing an article I just completed about the art ministry inside the immigrant family detention center. The focus of the ministry is HOPE—by being love present but also by doing the guided art meditations so that the women renew their hope for the future. The notes from my journal article which I will likely reference during the sermon:

Jürgen Moltmann famously argued in his *Theology of Hope* that people are influenced the most, not from their present sense of self, but from their expectations for their future. Hope originates in the future, but that future hope then helps to reshape one’s present attitudes and actions.

My understanding of hope also has been influenced by Søren Kierkegaard’s view of persons whom he described as having actuality, freedom, and possibility. (See, e.g., Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed., and trans. Reidar Thomte with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980)). Actuality encompasses a person’s past and includes the entire context of experiences which contributed to shaping someone’s present sense of self. Freedom refers to the present. It is a finite freedom in the sense that there are certain limitations in the present based upon what has shaped a person’s life from the (past) actuality. For example, the women are immigrants seeking asylum. They have left home and family and

country to seek a new life in the United States. However, within the actuality of their context they still have certain freedoms which they can exercise and which help to shape their new future. Our freedoms are, of course, limited, but we do have freedoms, including exercising what Viktor Frankl famously called “the last of the human freedoms”—the freedom of how to respond to what is happening that might otherwise seem beyond one’s control. (See, e.g. Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1959, 1962, 1984)). Possibility focuses on the future—a future that can be shaped by how one imagines the future within the limits of past and present situations, abilities, and choices. One can imagine—and ultimately become—something new.

Be encouraged by the famous words of the prophet Jeremiah: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jer. 29:11).

87. James 1 and 2

Preaching date: July 19, 2015

Confucianism—Philosophy or Religion?

Is Confucianism a religion or a philosophy? What makes it one or the other? What makes Christianity seem like a religion or philosophy? What must one “do” for (either) to be embodied as religion and/or philosophy? What about the human condition makes it so that there is a hungering/a longing for God? [Or as Augustine remarked in the opening to his Confessions that our hearts are restless until we rest in God.]

Continuing sermon series on major world religions: It is interesting to note that three related world religions in the East are portrayed as friendly and easily complementing each other (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism) whereas the so-called religions of the Book (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) cannot get along and many wars and horrific deeds have been done the name of the same One God of the same one Holy Book. Where is tolerance? Where is compassion? Why does one religion feel threatened by another? Why does one religion feel compelled to “convert” the others. What is at stake for our own faith when/if we feel the need to compel others to believe our way/in our God “or else...” How do we make any religion (and for my congregation clearly that would be Christianity) a philosophy as a system of beliefs about nature/life compared to the set of beliefs taking on religious significance and transforming our actions?

James 1:17-27; see Mark 7:1-23

James 2:1-10, 14-17; see Mark 7:24-37

James 5:13-20; see Numbers 11

Revelation 21:1-6; see two entries at John 11:32-44

Revelation 21; see II Timothy 4:6-8

APPENDIX D

PREACHERS’ INITIAL AND FINAL JOURNAL ENTRIES

Preacher A

Initial: Coming from a Salvation Army background, I would like to think that my understanding conforms to the Salvation Army doctrines. Our third doctrine states, “We believe that our first parents were created in a state of innocence, but by their disobedience they lost their purity and happiness, and that in consequence of their fall all men have become sinners, totally depraved, and as such are justly exposed to the wrath of God.” This seems to be a harsh statement, but there is plenty of room for forgiveness. This forgiveness can be found in Jesus Christ.

If I was to look at a sentence I would say that sin damages relationships.

Relationship with God

Relationship with others (humans)

Relationship with the world (environment)

A particular Bible passage that would resonate with me would be Romans 3:23 and 24 “...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

A theologian that has influenced my thinking would be NT Wright. His theology of heaven coming down and the importance of the Earth being recreated is foundational in my understanding of anthropology. It is not about heaven it is about healing the brokenness of the Earth and every living thing upon the Earth.

In terms of preaching I try to hold up Jesus who can bring healing to the sin and brokenness in this world and in our lives.

Final: I have learned that it is important to consider the human condition that arises in the text and in the preached sermon. It is good that this be explicitly stated and not only implied in the sermon. This does call the congregation to relate this information to their own lives. This has been a good process for me to go through. It has helped me to think more intentionally about my sermon preparation and delivery.

Preacher B

Initial: I actually suspect I start on the other side of this issue when working on my sermons. I look at the text and I seek to find grace there. I want to discover what God might be saying through this text. I am interested in discovering how we can grow in our faith as a result of engaging this text. Once I have found the grace in the text I try to work backwards to find the needs that must be addressed. I think about the people in the congregation who may be hearing this sermon. I think about the stories of people in the pews. I ask myself what these people need to hear. I think it is Fred Craddock who describes imagining a group of parishioners sitting in your study with you as you write the sermon. Because I know the stories of these people, I generally know what needs to be brought up in the sermon.

Our recent class with Paul Scott Wilson reinforced this idea. Lately I have been trying to identify a theme sentence for each sermon. As Wilson suggests, this theme sentence is about grace. It reflects God’s action in the text and in the sermon. Once I have settled on the theme, I can invert that theme in order to find the need. That is where I find the human condition.

I also believe strongly in Tillich’s idea that sin and sins are two totally different things. Tillich writes, “Sin does not mean an immoral act, that ‘sin’ should never be used in the plural, and that not our sins, but rather our *sin* is the great, all-pervading problem of our life.” Tillich goes on to define sin as that which separates from God.

The second writer who has influenced my views and conversation around the human condition is Barbara Brown Taylor. In her book *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* Taylor suggests that being able to name something as sinful is really our only hope. She writes, “Recognition that something is wrong is the first step toward setting it right again. There is no help for those who admit no need of help. There is no repair for those who insist that nothing is broken, and there is no hope of transformation for a world whose inhabitants accept that is sadly but irreversibly wrecked.” We must be able to name the need, the human condition, and reclaim

the language of sin. Only then can we claim that the world can be better. Without that all we get is the status quo.

Final: I most often imply human condition inviting others to make the connection through stories/examples in our life together. I imagine that I simply expect my listeners to accept my understanding especially when I pull from the news and/or life as we experience it together.

Preacher C

Initial: My goal is to help people see the workings of God in their life and in the world.

Final: I consider the human condition each week in preaching. I believe that it is very important to meet people where they are. That cannot be done if you ignore the human condition.

Preacher D

Initial: Under the influence of a seminary class I took, I have increasingly spent more time thinking about theological anthropology. Whenever I think about what it means to be human or whenever I think about the human condition I always end up with some kind of formulation about the tension between being finite creatures with an awareness of the infinite. Our self-awareness both allows us to see beyond ourselves and to be open to what is beyond and at the same time self-awareness imposes boundaries, defining or proscribing me in relation to another. Perhaps what characterizes the human condition for me is the potential human beings have to be open to others, to be able to love and embrace the other, while at the same time having self-preservation instincts that tend to cut us off from others. Theologically this is reflected in the tension between realized and unrealized eschatology, the already and not yet characteristic of the kingdom.

Important to me in any description of a theological anthropology is the inclusion of current scientific understandings of biology and evolution. That is to say, for me theology must be engaged in a real conversation with science. Or again that is to say that theology must take into account the facts on the ground. This is important to me, because I believe in a God that is present in the real world and who acts through ordinary means (people and things) to accomplish God's will for the world.

My thinking on theological anthropology has been influenced by Wolfhart Pannenberg's book *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (I haven't quite made my way through the entire tome, but Part One: The Person in Nature has been highly influential). I also just finished reading the book, *Unclean* by Robert Beck. This book examines the role of disgust psychology in the church. What intrigues me about this book is that disgust is boundary emotion. For obvious reasons this is important to our survival. But what Beck points out is that disgust is easily used to regulate boundaries in socioeconomic and religious spheres. It would be interesting to put these two (Pannenberg and Beck) into conversation with each other. Is disgust the regulating emotion between being open to the other (the infinite) and being closed off to the other (the finite)? Might disgust help explain the scandal of the incarnation in which there is a blurring of the infinite and the finite?

These underlying convictions inform my preaching in a couple of ways. I am drawn to themes of resurrection and new creation. When we can no longer see beyond ourselves or our situation, God's promise of resurrection, of new life, of new creation (not re-creation, but NEW creation) draws us out. The promise of new life in Christ uncurls our curved-in selves. When the finitude of our existence becomes too much to bear these themes engage our imaginations with possibilities we couldn't see before. The repetitive, relentless nature of "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" is broken by God's promises and becomes "tomorrow but tomorrow but tomorrow."

Final: I think I still tend to see the human condition in the same way that I did at the beginning of the study, but what I have come to realize is that this condition gets expressed in a variety of ways. I still tend to think of the human condition as arising from our awareness of infinitude and our finite nature. But this is manifest in our lives in a wide variety of ways. I never talked directly

about infinitude versus finitude only about the ways in which it is embodied in our lives. I was surprised at two things: how easy it was (most weeks) to find an articulation of the human condition either within the text itself or arising from an engagement with the text; and how diversely this tension is manifested in our lives.

One of the things I learned from this exercise is that talking about the human condition is a way into talking about sin in concrete terms. Another thing that I learned is that the wide variety of expressions of the human condition demands a wide and diverse expression of the gospel. By being forced to ask what is the human condition that is being explored in this text or in this sermon, I was also forced to answer the question what does salvation look like in this case? What does it mean to be rescued/redeemed/saved from this particular manifestation of sin in my life? And how is God accomplishing that?

Approaches: I almost always tended to state the human condition directly either as a statement or through a story and I generally assumed listeners would accept what I had to say.

I think this process has, more than anything, given me a better appreciation for the need to be concrete in my articulation of the gospel. Blanket statements about God's love, or the atoning nature of Jesus' death only go so far in response to particular expressions of sin/the human condition.

Preacher E

Initial: Over the years of writing sermons I have most often worked to live with the text for the week prior to preaching. I do my exegetical work early often on line through workingpreacher.org, pulling out old files which include both sermons and text study materials and then spend my week connecting the text with life and it unfolds.

Final: I have come to a point that what I have written on paper is probably not really what I say when I am actually preaching. I use my sermon as a springboard of ideas and a safety net in case my mind goes blank. I use the clock at the back of the sanctuary to pace myself. I often talk about how I live with the scripture and invite them to do the same. Asking rhetorically what jumps out at them and what God may have in mind for them to hear. I have a member who often says it is like I am looking in her window at home, but I remind her that the Spirit is at work in all of us. The Spirit calls, comforts and kicks us in the seat when we aren't paying attention.

Preacher F

Initial: While I do think about the human condition and theological anthropology, I am not so sure these are terms I typically use when thinking about either one. Although we are made in the image of God, we've marred the image because of our sin. In other words, there is a problem. Typically, I look for the problem in our text (what the people have done wrong) and also consider how/what that problem today and what we've done wrong. Yet, despite our brokenness, we're given the opportunity to respond to God's love and are capable of extreme love. I have been heavily influenced by Herman Stuempfle and Paul Scott Wilson. Stuempfle's work on preaching law and gospel has been incredibly helpful to me. While Wilson's four page approach echoes Stuempfle's work, it's more accessible when it comes to preaching. These theologians have shaped my commitment to preaching in profound ways. Both stress balance between the human condition and God's grace, which is something I've become more keenly aware of in my own preaching.

Final: I typically do not journal. Historically speaking, journaling has often been a more painful experience for me. So, this was somewhat difficult. That being said I found it helpful and may consider journaling more often in the future, especially since it wasn't like previous experiences. My tendency was to directly state the human condition. Over the course of these eight sermons there was a balance between expecting listeners to accept these understandings, with having to explain and persuade the understandings. It has changed my thinking theologically because it is often easier to focus on the negative (human condition) and less on the positive (theological

anthropology). I've learned to focus more on the positive (not that I brush over or ignore the negative) than I probably did in the past. I would like to think this has led to emphasizing God's grace, the good news, more in my sermons. The human condition doesn't have final word. Yay!!!

Preacher G

Initial: I concur entirely with the blessed Dr. Martin Luther, who described us as “simul justus et peccator.” That said, I don't think we take seriously the degree to which we *are* sinners or the depth of sin to which we can sink. Consequently, we underappreciate the depth of our redemption as well.

That we are “Simul justus et peccator” is certain, but my inclination when preaching is to believe that the hearers know themselves to be more sinner than saint. Or, cast apart from the moral freight the word “sin” might conjure, hearers know themselves to have failed to live up to the unvoiced but existentially tangible demands for success, be it defined materially or spiritually. In short, hearers show up Sunday already feeling a bit beat up. I am honest in naming the condition that is our brokenness, but I dwell there only as long as needed to move to the answer to our defeat, which is the victory of Christ. In that victory, I allow no claim of merit, but allow that victory to stand in contrast to what we actually deserve. As I understand it, this is nothing other than the standard Lutheran law-gospel dialectic, although perhaps poorly explained.

Obviously, Luther has informed my anthropology, although I must also give a nod to Dorothy Day, Pierre Tielhard de Chardin, and my wife, all of whom have taught me to be more patient and compassionate toward myself and others.

Final: I realized through this process that I almost always introduce anthropological considerations through story. Why? I suppose it is because I truly believe first-order discourse more accurately describes the human condition than second-order's more direct approach. My condition, our reality, belies analytical descriptors, but are better captured (and paradoxically, set free to be of use to others) in story. To wit, Old Lady Wobblestone didn't die a month after her husband because of Takotsubo cardiomyopathy, though that may be what the coroner wrote. She died of a broken heart.

I think that this approach, as unconscious to me as it has been to this point, shaped my theological reflection in that through the stories shared with me, I have been hearing the themes under which our common experience is described; love, loss, fear, joy, hate, sorrow, etc.

Preacher H

Initial: My understanding of the human condition and theological anthropology is summed up in one Calvinist phrase: total depravity. The counterbalance is the Arminian phrase prevenient grace. All of my preaching and teaching and pastoral care and pastoral counseling all move from these two premises: we are absolutely broken and a human mess in and of ourselves and yet we have hope/life/transformation from brokenness and selfishness through the amazing grace of God which we know best through the incarnation, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. During the past few years my insight on these two themes have been invaluable informed and enlightened through my PhD studies of the so-called postmodern hermeneutic with its interest in “truth/Truth.” John Caputo, Merold Westphal, and Jacques Derrida have been helpful on the philosophical front, and Carl Raschke has been helpful in interpolating the postmodern hermeneutic into an ecclesiological context. My understandings of total depravity—grace through the lens of the postmodern hermeneutic shape my preaching and general communicating with my congregation. We are united in naming and owning our own brokenness and our need for God's grace. The openness helps to break down any barriers of pride or sense of hierarchy of whose sins are “worse” than others. We agree to disagree when necessary but to always support one another through grace and presence and ministry, and prayer. One of the books which has been particularly helpful, and continues to inform my preaching and teaching, is Rabbi Hirschfield's *You Don't Have to Be Wrong for Me to Be Right*. The aforementioned shapes my approach to

the preaching task in several ways: (1) I never use “insider” or “churchy” language in my sermons. I do not assume everyone knows what I am talking about—including lifetime church people; (2) I always “assume” we are broken people who desire to come to a greater understanding of God’s amazing grace; (3) Grace is very evident throughout my preaching; (4) I always include a call to action—so that we move from theoretically “knowing” to embodying it in practice. In fact, we include an element in the service immediately following preaching [Love-Growing-Caring] to show and tell how members of the church have embodied their faith during the previous (or upcoming) week through loving God, growing in faith, and/or caring about God’s created world (Zech. 7:9-10; Mic 6:8).

Final: The journaling process has confirmed what I had always thought—but never quite put down into words: I do not assume anything when I go into the preaching process. I remain open to the text and am very much a Spirit-led preacher. I do the reading and research, but I do not go into it “looking” for something or assuming anything. I also listen to the life of my congregation and the world around us, and I am very intentional in connecting the reality around us with the Biblical text. I do not put words into my listener’s mouth—so to speak—but I lead them to LISTEN and then to be open to RESPONSE. Preaching is always incomplete without response. What will yours be?

Preacher I

Initial: I do not believe I am moved by a theological anthropology when it comes to preaching. My methodology to this point has been finding where the text intersects the life of the people I am serving and then working in a way to make the text come alive and influence the life of the congregation. I am focused on the love God shows to all of us, and that is the main thrust of my preaching. How we can better understand how God’s love influences our lives and how that in turn shows that love to the world. I have preached very hard sermons to hear, and preach, given the text and the intersection of the people, and I am committed to preaching the gospel and allowing it to offend if it does.

Final: I do not think anything has changed in my style or understanding of preaching during this study. I can say that I have thought a little more about the human condition as I prepare and reflect, but it did not change the mood or delivery of the sermon. Sometimes the human condition is directly stated, as in the sermon I preached on fear, and other times it is more implied, or left for the listener to discern. This is really what Jesus did in the parables. Sometimes the meaning is clear and out in the open, clearly stated, and other times it is implied or not stated at all and even today we read the texts and go, what in the world is Jesus talking about. I also think sometimes it is an easy thing for the listeners to accept and grasp hold of and other times it is a time of more persuading the listeners, sometimes there need to be more explanation, and even when a concept is clear and easily acceptable there needs to be explanation because the way God is leading us is different than the ways we “know”.

I think that I will look at the condition of the congregation a little closer and try to understand better the leading and the message God is giving to me to give to the congregation. I will better try to understand my own condition and that of the gathered body to better articulate the message of the good news and how that has an effect on all of us.

Preacher J

Initial: Reflecting on human condition and theological anthropology.

The human condition crosses my mind on an almost daily basis, as a starting point for how we experience God. The psalmist asks, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, O God?” Paul’s letter to Romans reminds us, “All sin and fall short of the glory of God.” Sin is a unique part of what it is to be human, though there are days when I wonder if animals can sin when my dog intentionally disobeys my commands. The human condition, in a broader than theological sense, is what differentiates us from other creatures, from other beings, like God.

Maybe a rational mind, or linear thinking, or the ability to choose our actions and sometimes in doing so, to override our material needs (what social scientists call “lizard brain”). I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about the human condition from a non-theological perspective because the word that stands at the center of that concept for me is *sin*. Missing the mark, we humans are, even with our best intentions, always choosing what will lead to harm, if left to our own devices. As a Presbyterian, John Calvin of course influences my thinking here, in balance and conversation with more recent feminist and womanist theologians who reject the idea that everything we do is terrible. On the one hand, I believe we can do no good apart from God. On the other hand, I believe we were made good and called good by God in the beginning. Perhaps patriarchy was the original sin we chose and keep choosing for ourselves in a self-harming way. Sin can be egotism, thinking too much of ourselves and our own ability to cope without God, but it can also be not thinking enough of ourselves and letting this good body/mind/spirit we were gifted with from God take abuse from ourselves and from each other. Sin blocks our ability to reach out or takes step toward God. In contrast to many mainline protestants I know (including my own congregants), I can’t honestly subscribe to the popular image of grace being like a stair case in which God has descended all the way down and we need only take one step on our own towards God. I don’t think humans have it in us. God does all the work; God does all the reaching. This means when I approach the preaching task, I know it isn’t just my words or my thoughts at work to create something. I am an instrument in the tapestry God weaves using ancient text, modern interpretation, preacher’s experiences, listener’s experiences, the particular intersection of time, space, current events, to weave a moment of transformation. It’s hard then for me to repeat or recycle a sermon for a different day or a different audience, because to do so would be to embrace the idea that my own words on a page are timeless or worth something outside of the moment for which God wove them into meaning. They fall lifeless without all these other pieces working together for the glory of God.

So that’s where we begin with human condition. We’re lazy. We do no good apart from God. And yet, to think less of ourselves than God does is also sinful. We suck.

So how do you begin preaching with/for/to that kind of attitude? You certainly don’t start with berating. This is where the baptists get the bad wrap from the presbys. We realize that fire and brimstone just won’t get you too far. In seminary we like to call that “being pastoral.” Pastoral being another word for nice. I hate that. I don’t want to be nice in the pulpit. I want to nudge and challenge and invite. Those three verbs: nudge, challenge, invite. Beckon, explore, wander. Go deeper.

Final: I began with the idea that “nudging, challenging, and inviting” was all that preaching (in good faith) could do. I’m not sure that’s true anymore, or if it is true, it is much more powerful than I initially estimated. Along with this Calvinistic idea of humans being incapable of doing good on our own and in general our condition being a terrible one, I’ve recognized that there is enormous power in this condition. We are powerful in how cruel we can be, but also the power of God working within us propels to do great, ordinary kindnesses. To get to this development, my preaching had to begin with where I sensed the human condition already in the people to whom I preach. The people were who I brought with me to the text. I know some more famous theologian I read in seminary said that’s what we preachers should do—bring our people with us to the text. And I know for some traditions, the people for whom you preach are your “lectionary” telling you what text they need to hear.

I mix up whether I need to state directly what the crux of being human is in my preaching or if I leave it implied. As a Presbyterian, I think it would be pretty rough on the listeners if I stated directly that we’re lazy and impossible and no one would want to be around us except for God if it weren’t for God working in us every bit of the way. Implied communication is probably safer preaching. But from time to time one needs to hear: I’ve messed up. Badly. And God loves me anyway.

It seems the more time I spend with other humans and away from the books they write, the clearer my sense is of this human condition. Yet, the writings of theologians, pastors, saints of the church, give me a language in which to understand what I think my heart knows pretty well: if there's a way for us to mess up, we humans will figure it out. And yet, God chooses to be in relationship with us.

Preacher K

Initial: We are remarkable, mysterious, beautiful beings caught up in a web of influences and relationships (Clifford Geertz, cultural anthropologist). When we transcend and reflect upon who we are, we discover that most of who we are has been passed down to us. We are material vessels of memory (Wendell Berry, Marilynne Robinson). The living God breathes into us, and we become aware of our oneness with all things (Genesis 2). Our future is fully tied up with God's saving of all material reality (Romans 8:15-16, 22-23). The gift of the Holy Spirit makes us aware of our connection to God's eternal life present in all things (First & Third Articles). "I believe that God has created me *together with all that exists....*" (Luther). Jesus is the embodiment of God's oneness with all creation, the one whose life is connected to God's eternal life (Second Article). Forgiveness of sins is a means to reconciliation with God and one another. One of my favorite scenes comes at the end of Wendell Berry's *Jayber Crow*, where Jayber turns to look at Troy and loves him, though he is in the act of destroying the forest Jayber so loves.

APPENDIX E

SERMON CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1

Date: Sunday July 19, 2015

Sermon Text: Mark 6:14-29

Preacher's Journal Entry – See Appendix C:25

Sermon Manuscript

I didn't want to read this story to you this morning. I wouldn't blame you if it is not what you wanted to hear. I don't know what your taste is in fiction or movies; perhaps this could make a strangely fascinating *story*; but it's not fiction. It felt odd – even inappropriate – to say, "His disciples came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb – the gospel, the Good News, of the Lord." I wouldn't fault you if you weren't quite ready to sing out, "Praise to you, O Christ!" This isn't what you came here for. By reading this story aloud, we feel death intruding: death intrudes into our lives; death intrudes even into our time of worship this morning. I wish this story of the death of John the Baptist weren't here for us to read. I wish it weren't true, but Mark says it is. "Herod sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison." With clubs and torches, they jostled him down a dark hall, deep in Herod's fortress. As the cell door closed, the torchlight fell upon his face for just a moment, one last moment – can you make out his expression? What do his eyes tell you? Do you see fear there? Surely John knew where this was leading. What else do you see? Then the door slammed, and the darkness was complete. The lock turned, clanking into place. Receding steps gave way to silence.

Some time later, “Herod, on his birthday, gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.” It was a very different scene: while John sat in darkness, Herod’s hall was bright with torches, and the dancing flames of a hundred candelabras. While John sat in silence, Herod’s ears were filled with the clink of glasses and dishes, with laughter of guests, and music. While John waited for bread and water, Herod feasted, his belly full, with food enough to spare, food enough to waste. While John pondered the dark and the quiet, Herod’s senses were filled with the best entertainment money could buy. That night, John’s contemplations would come to an end. He would face death. But death would intrude into that banquet hall, too. Their feast would be twisted into a grotesque and grisly scene. Death finds a way of intruding into our lives. We all face death. We can face it like John, with thought and preparation; or we can face it like Herod’s revelers, stumbling always closer, but unaware.

Certain times, and certain cultures, have pondered death, searching for meaning, facing the reality of death. But not our time. Not our culture. With longer lives on average, surrounded by plenty, we look elsewhere – we look *anywhere* else. If food is good, more must be better, till there is food to spare, food to waste. We seek out the best entertainment that money can buy. With bellies full, and senses full, life, for us, is an end in itself. Our goal in life is – more life. We live in Herod’s world. We wonder if there could possibly be anything more important in life than staying alive. If there is anything we believe is worse than dying, we can’t recall what that would be.

We don’t want to think about it, but still death intrudes. It comes in the news: mass shootings - senseless death like John’s senseless death. It has only been a month since the shootings in Charleston – nine Christians around a Bible study table. But already there have been more. We don’t want to think about death, but we hear these shocking accounts and our banquet is interrupted.

All signs suggest we live in Herod’s world.

But John – John had a clarity that isn’t possible in Herod’s world. God prepared John to face death. John knew what life was for – he knew that there are more important things than just staying alive, and worse things than death. God had prepared John to face death.

How? He knew Jesus. We know John, and we know he was one of only a few who had seen Jesus and recognized him for who he is. To know Jesus for who he is is to recognize the God who sets us free.

There is a verse in the book of Hebrews, chapter 2 that I find myself turning to often to help me recognize Jesus for who he is. It says there: he came to set free all who live their lives imprisoned by the fear of death. John was prepared for death; he met Jesus, who sets us free from the fear of death.

A few weeks ago, I came across an icon – one of these special artworks in this ancient tradition of images that teach and proclaim the Christian faith. At bottom of the frame is a yawning abyss – a black emptiness, a bottomless darkness. Above the abyss, planted firmly on solid ground, stands Jesus Christ. He has his wounds; he has been raised. Teetering on the edge of the abyss are two caskets – two coffins. They are open, and from them Jesus is pulling two living people – a man and a woman – it turns out: Adam and Eve, standing in for all of us, the whole human race. They are alive, and Jesus is pulling them by the arm, one in each hand, pulling them up, alive, from their tombs.

When I first saw this icon, it was a very small print – I couldn’t make out the details. I could see that there was something – small objects – falling into the abyss, and in the background, there stood onlookers, one of them pointing to the risen Christ. Later, I got to see a larger print, and the story is in the details: those small objects falling into the abyss I could clearly see: they were keys and broken locks – the locks that had imprisoned Eve and Adam in their tombs. Broken, they fell away. And the man in the background, pointing to Christ? It was John.

God prepared John to face death. He had seen Jesus, and knew he came to set us free. As John was put into prison, when last the torchlight showed his face, what do you see there? What do his eyes tell you? Do you see fear there? Surely John knows where this will lead. But what else do you see? Determination? A serenity, perhaps, that is just a little out of place in a dungeon? A peace, like these guards have never seen before? A confidence that gives its own light, even in the darkest of prison cells?

I can only imagine what John's face looked like in that moment, but I don't have to imagine the firm features and bright eyes of those I have known that have determined that the truth must be spoken despite any consequences – and those who offer their lives to stand with those who suffer with a peace that passes understanding.

After the news of these mass shootings, sometimes we get to know the people who were killed – to see their smiling faces as they were in life, and to hear their stories. As the stories came out about those pastors and leaders killed in their Charleston church, we came to know that these were people who knew there were more important things in life than just staying alive. This doesn't make their deaths any less tragic – No! It makes them more tragic; these were people with so much more to give – like John the Baptist – there is power in people who know what life is for. It is tragic, and yet we can rejoice to know that they, like John, knew Jesus and in knowing Jesus, they knew the God who comes to set us free.

God prepares us to face death. I can only imagine what John's face looked like as he faced death, but I don't have to imagine the people I have known: the steady gaze, in the face of a terminal diagnosis – fearful, surely, yet *also* peaceful, and steady – I don't have to imagine it – I've seen it. Jesus frees us from the fear of death. You have known people who knew what life was for, who, when it mattered, revealed that God had set them free from the fear of death.

We can see in their faces, and in the face of John, the reflection of the face of Jesus as he decided again and again that life is for others, *more* than it is for prolonging; and that worse than dying would be leaving this world untransformed.

Christ's followers have always known these things; if you haven't thought about it in a while, try this week to name for yourself what would be worse than dying; name for yourself what is more important than simply staying alive. Do this in the freedom Christ has won for you, setting you free from the fear of death.

How could we go on wanting what Herod has when we can have what John has?

The fear of death is a dark prison cell; but John knew, and we know, that the lock is broken. We know the lock is broken, because we know the one who broke it. Praise to you, O Christ! Amen.

Sermon Listener Feedback Survey

1. What do you think was this sermon's understanding of the human condition: the truth about human nature, or the predicament we all find ourselves in? (Please feel free to use your own words, or the preacher's words as you remember them.)

Respondent A: As openly stated by the preacher we live our lives each day ignoring the inevitability of death. Yet as followers of Christ we can face death without fear.

B: Illustrated the contrast between John's life and Herod's life of excess. Presented John's possible thoughts and feelings in his final days and minutes.

C: The human condition is to deny death and attempt to get around it. The preacher did state it openly.

D: The sermon addressed the human condition, regarding perspectives about death. Our culture is "Herod's world;" it doesn't prepare us for death. John the Baptist was prepared – because he was of "Jesus' world." It was very clearly stated.

E: How do we feel about death in a light of Christ in our culture? It was stated openly.

F: Death intrudes:

- 1) Into the life of the powerless, i.e. John

- 2) Into the life of those who live in Herod's world, i.e. seeking only longer and more enjoyable years
- 3) In seemingly senseless ways into the lives of the innocent, e.g. Charleston victims

2. Was that description of the human condition something you could relate to? How strongly did it resonate with you? Where does it connect with your own life and experiences?

A: Yes I could strongly resonate. It recalled the death of a child at a young age who certainly lived life without thought of death. The knowledge she was a child of God gave me assurance she could face death without fear.

B: Vivid. Especially poignant as we are experiencing some tribulations in our own lives. We are waiting for the sense of serenity...

C: I could relate to it because death is about the farthest thing from my mind. (As I am [young age].) I strongly related to the condition. My dogs have died as well as a few relatives.

D: Being older, the topic did resonate with me personally. I could relate to how different friends/family members have faced death. Those who have been Christian have not had the fear that others have had. I think I am much more fearful of something bad happening to one of my children than my own death.

E: I related it to myself and touch my own experience as well as the experience of others that I have witnessed. Very strongly resonates with me. Connects with my own cancer diagnosis and experience as well as my experiences with patients.

F: Yes, as a senior citizen, the sense of death's anguish is more real and the sense of powerlessness more oppressive – means the conviction that it is but a gate through which we reach the longed-for home.

3. Is there anything you can remember in today's reading(s) from the Bible that connects to this understanding of the human condition?

A: John the Baptist's belief in Jesus Christ could help him overcome fear with the knowledge he would be united with Christ in heaven.

B: Being familiar with a plumb line it was easy to connect the readings to "being on the straight and narrow path."

C: John not fearing his death. How we, like Herod, don't think about death.

D: On first hearing the reading of John's beheading and the focus on death I was intrigued. How were you going to make sense of it? But the vivid language made it memorable.

E: The image of John sitting in the cell is like being trapped in situations in life. Herod's wife manipulating both her husband and daughter and Herod's unwillingness to "lose face" reminds me of hurtful dysfunction that happens in families and the damage done.

4. What in this sermon sounded like good news to you? (Feel free to state it in your own words.)

A: Through following Jesus Christ, there is no need to fear death.

B: Life is all encompassing. While there are lows, there are highs too. Keep a straight course and maintain your faith.

C: We can choose how to face death. We know Jesus, so we shouldn't fear death.

D: The reference to Hebrews – He (Jesus) came to set us free from the fear of death was good news. It also made me think more about senseless/random death – in a sense comforting to know the Charleston victims were well prepared.

E: God is always with us. A relationship with God helps prepare us for scary or distasteful things in life. Living without God seems far worse than death.

F: There are worse things than death and more important things than extending life. Recognizing who Jesus is (as John did) sets us free from the fear of death – so we can have what John had.

5. *What did this sermon change for you, or how did it make you feel? What questions does it raise?*

A: Peace in my faith.

B: John's faith gave him a sense of serenity even at the brutal end. I hope I can find the same serenity facing my life's trials and tribulations.

C: It made me really think about my future. How will I go about dealing with death?

D: It gave me a sense of peace. I know my loved ones are not so much of "Herod's World" and are not fearful. It made me realize there are many more things worse than my own death.

E: I had feelings of loss. It reminded me of my cancer diagnosis and the feelings I had and those of others around me. I am not sure it raised questions. It validated the peace that I have felt in my life when I felt alone except for knowing and truly feeling that God was with me.

F: Feeling: Reinforced my confidence in faith in Christ as the protection against the fear of death.

Question: My remaining fear of death is of the process of dying in which I will have to sacrifice (or subordinate) my life long quest for power to become powerless in the face of human agents. Man's inhumanity to man is legend, however well intended.

Case Study 2

Date: Sunday August 23, 2015

Sermon Texts: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; John 6:56-69

Preacher's Journal Entry – see Appendix C:11

Sermon Manuscript

Dear hearers of the Word, grace and peace to you from God our Father, from Jesus our bread, and from the Holy Spirit, the one who gives us life. Amen.

I know some of you were there a few weeks ago when we gathered over at [Name] Park for our annual joint worship service with [Name] and [name] Lutheran churches. It was a beautiful day to worship outside in the park and we had as our guest preacher, Bishop [Name]. And I've been thinking a lot about his sermon from that day. He wondered if in our communities and churches, if maybe we'd lost Jesus. And then he challenged us to not only find Jesus but to be Jesus in and for our community. So I've been thinking – have we lost Jesus, have I lost Jesus? The more I think about this and the more I try to answer the question the more I find myself wanting to explain to Bishop [Name], that I didn't mean to lose Jesus, it's just that it's hard. This life of discipleship, of being Jesus in the world is hard.

Of course I'm not, you're not, we're not the only ones to have lost Jesus, to find this life of discipleship hard. Our gospel reading tells us that many people, many of Jesus' early followers found his teachings too hard and so they left Jesus. And Jesus himself knows that people are struggling with what he has to say. Does this offend or scandalize you, he asks? Because if it does, if this whole bread of life business is hard to swallow just you wait.

I don't know if you know this about me or not, but I'm a bit of a Harry Potter fan and every so often I find time to re-read the series. There is a quote from the fourth book, *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire*, that I want to share with you. These are words spoken by Albus Dumbledore who is the headmaster of Hogwarts. He is speaking to the school at a critical juncture in the series. Lord Voldemort, the dark Lord, has just returned to power and is gaining in strength and followers. From this point forward the series will now move inexorably towards a confrontation between Harry and Lord Voldemort, between good and evil, between love and fear. This is what Dumbledore has to say: "Dark times lie ahead of us and there will be a time when we must choose between what is easy and what is right."

This is more or less the same message that Joshua had for the Israelites in our first reading for today: "Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve..."

Before we go on, we had better stop because I know Lutherans have an allergy to the word

choose. When we hear this we start to fidget in our seats, we get a little twitchy, our heart rates increases, and we start repeating this mantra to ourselves: we are justified by grace through faith and not by works of the law... we are justified by grace through faith and not by works of the law. Yes you are right. Take a deep breath, it's gonna be okay. We *are* justified by grace through faith and not by works of the law, not even the work of choosing. God's gift of salvation is a free gift that we do not earn or merit or choose for ourselves. Notice that Joshua's words to the Israelites come *after* God has already saved and delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and brought them into the promised land. God always acts first to save and to redeem God's people. The choice is not, it is never about salvation – you have already been saved – the choice is about how to respond to the gift. Jesus' question to his disciples, "Do you also wish to go away?" is a question about how to respond to what the Father has and is doing in and through Jesus. Do you also wish to go away? If you're honest, the answer is probably yes, just like Bishop [Name] suggested. It's easier to walk away. Jesus' message is a hard message. It's hard to live as a disciple, to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. There are *soooo* many other messages, easier messages, messages that tell us what we want to hear – you can do it, you're awesome, you can have everything that you want, your way is the best way. And messages that make promises, promises that sound like they can bring or create life – if you just work hard or save more money or own the right kind of thing (whatever that thing is) then you'll find fulfillment or joy or a long life or whatever it is you're looking for. But of course it's not true and deep down we know that. It's just that it's easier to believe it than not. We know, for example, that things can't really make us happy, not in the long term. But they do bring us a sort of temporary happiness and so it's easier to live in that place of temporary happiness for as long as we can and deal with later – well, later.

There will be a time when we must choose between what is easy and what is right. It is not easy to choose to follow Jesus. In following Jesus, in eating the bread and wine he offers we eat the very body and blood of Christ and we become christs in the world. Just as Jesus is our bread of life we too become bread for the world. This is not the easy choice. Why would anyone choose to respond in this way? Because it is the right choice. Sunday by Sunday we answer this question in the same way Peter answered Jesus' question. Just before the reading of the gospel we sing: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

In the end all of those easy messages and those promises that sound too good to be true fall short. In the end, it is Jesus, it is ever only Jesus. It is Jesus who has the words, no who *is* the word of eternal life. Whatever else is out there that is competing for your attention, making you grandiose promises – it, they are false. This is not going to be easy. If Bishop [Name] is right and we have lost Jesus, then we must find Jesus again. But there's good news. Jesus is not that hard to find nor do you have to find Jesus on your own – there is help. The Spirit is always around making Jesus known in our lives and in the world. Jesus is already out there looking for us and calling to us by name. Here today, the Spirit has called and gathered us together to show us Jesus. Here in this place we will not only praise God, and give thanks for God's many blessings, but we hear Jesus' words of eternal life and we will eat the bread that Jesus provides, the bread of life, his body and blood. And from here we will be sent out into the world where our work begins, where we become bread for the hungry, water for the thirsty, hope for the despairing, advocates for the disenfranchised, where we become Christ for our neighbor.

Oh this will not be easy, but where else can we go, to whom shall we turn? The Israelites were asked to choose between the Lord or the god of the Amorites or the gods of the land in which they were now living. Every day we too are asked to choose between the Lord and the many gods of the land in which we live. There will be a time when we must choose between what is easy and what is right. Choose this day whom you will serve. As for me and my household we will serve the Lord. We will follow Jesus.

Sermon Listener Feedback Survey

1. What do you think was this sermon's understanding of the human condition: the truth about human nature, or the predicament we all find ourselves in? (Please feel free to use your own words, or the preacher's words as you remember them.)

Respondent A: We are in need of God's love, grace, forgiveness, and mercy...and we are called to respond to it by spreading it to others.

B: The human condition is that we all have a tendency to forget about Jesus. Our lives get so busy that Jesus falls into the background of our lives.

C: We have the power to make choices as humans. We can choose.

D: Choosing between what is easy and what is right. The human condition is to go with what is easy, what suits us.

E: Discipleship is HARD, and choosing to follow Jesus is often hard. While this is not a question of our salvation, which is won already and certain, choosing to follow Jesus as disciples is often hard. Our human tendency is to choose the easier path, even when deep down we know that it can't lead us to the fullness of life.

2. Was that description of the human condition something you could relate to? How strongly did it resonate with you? Where does it connect with your own life and experiences?

A: Yes. It is easy to rely on one's own ideas and ways of doing things...to think ours is the "right" way. And to believe that earthly things will lead to joy and happiness. To refocus on the source of life is to step outside of selfishness and become open to serving others. While difficult, this is where lasting joy can be experienced.

B: It was for me. For years I didn't think I really needed Jesus – that I was doing fine on my own. [Congregation] has been my church all my life. It wasn't until I met someone that was very involved in the church to bring me back in.

C: Many great examples were given. As a congregation we could relate to the choices we make every day as Christians.

D: There is a Dan Fogelberg song that I have always been drawn back to called Nether Lands. I have quoted it often: "Once in a vision I came to some woods and stood at a fork in the road. My choices were clear yet I froze with the fear of not knowing which way to go. One road was simple, acceptance of life, the other road offered sweet peace. When I made my decision my vision became my release." I have hopefully, prayerfully chosen the path that is "right." I have a piece of art (painting) that has the words "The impossible dream...isn't." All of these speak to following the more difficult path but the one I have felt was right. From doing volunteer work when I studied abroad in Germany, to going to Tanzania, to doing my master's program, to working for LSS, adopting our girls from Russia, leaving LSS for camp and Clergy Life Coaching and now going on my own with Clergy Life Coaching – no regrets!

E: Yes, as there are so many voices out there that tell us what we want to hear, that inflate our "self," that disregard our "neighbors," and that sell us the next best thing we just must have to be happy. Even though such voices or "gods" in the end all fall short, they are attractive – they are the easier one to choose to listen to.

3. Is there anything you can remember in today's reading(s) from the Bible that connects to this understanding of the human condition?

A: Yes, both readings focused on the choice between "what is easy and what is right." [Preacher] did a nice job of tying this into the message.

B: Jesus' followers felt that it was too difficult to do what Jesus was asking of them and they left.

C: Our ability to make wise choices.

D: "Choose this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" from Joshua.

E: The Old Testament reading from Joshua names the same truth and reality of seeking to serve God in the midst of those other voices that call us away. The gospel reading from John names

how difficult and offensive Jesus' call to follow can seem. Many turn away, because such teaching is difficult.

4. What in this sermon sounded like good news to you? (Feel free to state it in your own words.)

A: It's all good news! Even though difficult at times, making the choice to serve Jesus is not only "right," it leads to lasting joy and happiness.

B: When [preacher] reminded us that everyone loses Jesus from time to time—even [preacher and congregation's other pastor]. That really hit home for me – that the human condition can cause us all to fail but that Jesus still loves us.

C: It is our privilege to make the choice.

D: Choosing what is right over what is easy. Choosing Jesus and being God's hands and feet. Doing God's work with our hands NOT because it will bring us salvation but it is because we are saved that we in turn serve others!

E: Jesus feeds us with the very bread of life, bread of heaven, his body, his love, his fullness and abundance. This is the food that truly satisfies. Jesus is always seeking us, inviting us, welcoming us to follow. The Spirit is empowering us and encouraging us. YES, discipleship is often hard. But it is TRUE, connecting us to the one of TRUTH. There is power and life in such truth, that which we can find nowhere else in any other voice or easy choice.

5. What did this sermon change for you, or how did it make you feel? What questions does it raise?

A: It made me reflect on my priorities. Why I do the things I do day to day, and where I may need to refocus outside myself to be Christ more to others.

B: It made me feel good, loved, accepted by Jesus even when I know I fail him. [Preacher] does a great job in delivery and in content that can really drive home even the most obvious but forgotten points.

C: It empowered me and encouraged me.

D: It affirmed my choices in life and the reasons behind those choices. It was definitely good news for me...I can always strive to do better but today I felt my loving God's arms around me saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant" – now go and do more good!

E: I love the quote from Harry Potter, "There will be a time when we must choose between what is easy and what is right." There is comfort and consolation that following Jesus is not just supposed to be some sort of cakewalk. Sometimes our discipleship is hard. And often we will fall short. But the grace of God welcomes us forever and anew on this journey of practicing faith together.

Case Study 3

Date: Sunday, August 23, 2015

Sermon Text: John 6:56-69

Preacher's Journal Entry – see Appendix C:59

Sermon Manuscript

This passage this morning gives us something that's actually very clear, and I think something that each and every one of us can absolutely understand. Towards the end of this passage it says that many of the disciples heard what Jesus was saying and it was too hard for them to understand. It's too hard for us to do. Hard isn't really a good word—it's something that they didn't understand. It's not difficult in the way that we think of difficult today. It's more of a "I just don't believe it. I can't understand it, I can't take it, I can't do it." It's not that I don't want to it's just that I can't.

So here we have this group of disciples that hear this hard saying and what do they do? They walk away. They turn around and they walk away. It's not that they were just the crowd—we have to make sure that we understand that completely. John doesn't say that it was just a crowd that heard some of the stuff that Jesus was saying and they decided that they weren't going to follow and listen anymore. John actually says that these people who turned around and walked away were disciples. These were people who had given up a part of their lives—who had given something up—to follow after Jesus. They had followed after Jesus—probably for quite some time—and now Jesus says to them these things that are too hard for them to take, and they just stop following, and go back home.

Have you ever been there? I won't ask you to raise your hands. Have we ever been in that spot where we've followed Jesus, and we think we've done the things that God's asked us to do, and we just get to the point of "I just don't know if I can do this anymore. I don't know if this is possible for me to continue down the road that I've gone on." You want to just turn around and walk away.

I've been there. I'll admit it. I can think right now off the top of my head of several times, one of which my wife reminded me of in the past couple of days. It was about the time we were going to seminary and how I was questioning whether or not we were going to go. We lived in [state] and we still owned our house. We had a year-old child and another child on the way. My wife didn't work, we had a baby, and a baby coming, and now I'm quitting my job and going to have to pay for school when neither one of us are working. In my mind I thought "There is absolutely no way this is going to happen." I remember like it was yesterday—my wife said, "I'm moving to [seminary] whether you're coming with me or not." I said, "Okay, so I guess I'm going." So we went.

That was a time that I questioned whether or not I was going to be able to do what I knew God was calling me to do. I knew that God wanted me to go to seminary. God was calling me to go to seminary, and I was questioning that because my focus was on "How are we gonna pay for this? How is this gonna be possible? How am I gonna provide for my family?" I was focused on things that weren't what God needed me to focus on.

This passage is about how the disciples came to Jesus and they were following after him because he gave them something that they didn't understand and he was teaching them something that was new to them. Then it finally got to the point where he told them this one thing over and over again and they just couldn't take it anymore. So they gave it up. They turned around and they walked away. Because they were looking at things and trying to understand it in their own lives: Making it to fit the pattern of what they had planned, making it fit the pattern of what they thought was supposed to happen in their lives.

Then there's Peter and the eleven. Jesus turns to them after he sees all of these disciples walking away, and he says, "So are you guys gonna leave too?" What's the difference between these twelve and the rest of the disciples?

Another time when people asked me why I wasn't turning around and walking away was the period of time when I came to be with you all. I resigned my call at my previous congregations in [month, year] and I didn't start here until [month, year]. That's almost two years I went without having a call. I had several people ask me, over that time period, why I was still doing this—Why was I still putting myself through this? I had a list and I actually can show it to you—I still have it—of all the congregations around the country that I talked to trying to find a call. It wasn't that I was just sitting around doing nothing. You can ask my wife. I was actively flying all around and got so many frequent flyer miles those two years... During that time—don't get me wrong—I questioned whether or not I was actually doing what God was calling me to do. Several people asked me how I could be so happy and so upbeat even through all of the garbage that we were going through. It was hard. How do you provide for a family if you don't have a job when you're the one who was working? How do you take care of the needs of those who are in your care, who are supposed to be part of your call—I am called to be a pastor but I'm also called to be a father,

and a husband, and a provider for my family—So how do you do that in the midst of not having a job, and looking for one? There were several times that I wondered why: “Why am I going through this? Why is this happening?” What kept me going? Number one: my family. That and the fact that, kind of like the disciples, the focus was there.

See I asked the question of what is the difference between the Twelve—Peter and the eleven—and the disciples that turned around and walked away? It’s right there plain in the words that Peter says. Jesus says, “Are you guys also gonna go away?” Peter looks at Jesus and he says, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Who else are we going to go to? It’s so easy for us to look at this passage of scripture and say that the disciples that left Jesus were slow in faith, didn’t have enough faith, that they doubted the whole time they were there; and that Peter and the other eleven disciples are just monsters of faith and people that we should raise up onto pinnacles and hold in high reverence. But remember, each and every one of our Gospel writers says that these twelve were morons. Plain and simple. They didn’t get it. A little bit later in the Gospel of John, Jesus calls Peter Satan: “Get behind me Satan!” because you’re focused on earthly things not on what actually has to happen. These twelve were not any better disciples than the ones that left. So why is it that they got it? Why is it that they stuck around? It’s because they knew where to look. All these other disciples were so worried about the earthly things, about not being able to understand what Jesus was saying to them in a way that they would get it and would fit their plan. Peter and the eleven—They knew where to look. They were focused on Jesus. Now not all the time, right? We can see it in the Gospels: In John, Jesus later calls Peter Satan. So every now and then they miss it.

It’s okay for us to miss it. I missed it when we were moving to [seminary]. I missed it a few times in that two years that I was looking for a call. Then you just have to bring your focus back around. When you focus on Jesus, when you see him standing in front of you and he is the focus for everything that’s happening in your life, then it doesn’t matter what else is happening around you, and it doesn’t matter whether or not what he’s asking you to do makes sense, because you know it’s gonna work out. Trust me, if it had to make sense I wouldn’t have moved from [state] to [state], and I wouldn’t have moved from [state] to [state]. While we love it here, sometimes those decisions just don’t make sense. But you know what? It’s what God wanted us to do. In the end it doesn’t matter if we completely understand it. We know that God is going to take care of us, and that God is going to be in and work through these relationships and these things that are happening. That’s where our focus has to be. If we see anything else but Jesus, then we need to turn around and look at what we need to be looking at.

We need to be Cross Eyed. [Showing an image] This type of image doesn’t work for everyone, but if you look at this, what do you see? There’s two “i”s, but if you look at it really close you’ll also see something else. There’s a cross. You need to be Cross Eyed. You need to focus on Jesus. As Hebrews tells us, if we can focus on Jesus—the author and protector of our faith—then everything else is going to work out. Not in our plan, not in our way, but in his way. That, my friends, is the best way that it ever could work out. So keep your focus on Jesus, and know that what he’s asking you to do may not make sense, but it’s the best decision that you could ever make.

Sermon Listener Feedback Survey

1. What do you think was this sermon’s understanding of the human condition: the truth about human nature, or the predicament we all find ourselves in? (Please feel free to use your own words, or the preacher’s words as you remember them.)

Respondent A: Following God/Jesus is hard, difficult, and challenging. Some quit following Jesus and went back to their own ways.

B: When things are too difficult to understand or do, we are likely to walk away and give up. Even the disciples did this (some) except “the twelve.”

C: We all have times in our lives that we question what God had planned for us, as it may not be what we are focused on.

D: Sometimes it's hard to stick with what may not make sense or what we don't totally understand but what we know is right – what Jesus wants us to do.

E: I am not sure it is human nature, but people do tend to walk away from situations that are difficult. Having the fortuity to stick with a difficult situation or task is difficult and frequently not seen. I also believe that when something is difficult to understand people will choose to disbelieve versus understand.

F: We walk away from things we can't understand.

G: The human condition is in true need of relying on the words of the bible. An example from the pastor's struggle concerning whether or not to attend seminary school was a good example that related to today's lesson.

2. Was that description of the human condition something you could relate to? How strongly did it resonate with you? Where does it connect with your own life and experiences?

A: Yes. At times it seems easier to quit than to follow Jesus in ways that seem demanding.

B: Absolutely. We all feel overwhelmed. Faith carries us forward. A strong faith gives strength in perseverance as well and confidence in spite of questions. Look beyond earthly understanding!

C: For the past two years I have been questioning my calling for work, life, and spirit. Several list interviews, pages of questioning God and recently God has assured why things are working out the way they are.

D: Absolutely! It had a strong and much needed impact on me. There are several things I've been struggling with and today's words fed me the reassurance I've been seeking—without even realizing I've needed it—to stick to what I know.

E: It is difficult to “stay the course” whether at work or in our spiritual lives when things become difficult or we do not understand. I also see this with families, enabling their children when the children's lives become difficult and parents want to solve the issues versus having the child seek understanding and figure it out.

F: Yes. It's difficult to trust what we can't understand. It makes us vulnerable. I'm hesitant because I fear people will take advantage of me if I do.

G: Yes, each and every day we/I need to be more focused on the lessons that Jesus offers instead of the lessons society offers. There is only one Jesus. I need to remember that in my daily life.

3. Is there anything you can remember in today's reading(s) from the Bible that connects to this understanding of the human condition?

A: Many disciples said “This is a difficult saying! Who can understand it?”

B: Even the disciples questioned – but the faith of the twelve led to greatness.

C: That we will all have times where we lose our true focus.

D: The twelve stayed with Jesus while the other disciples left. They walked away when what Jesus said didn't fit their plan of what they thought would happen.

E: This is what happened to the disciples when they did not understand. It is interesting that the twelve stayed the course because of their faith.

F: Where else can we go? Only Jesus has words of eternal life. The rest of the world is full of broken promises and despair.

G: It was hard to understand and believe for the disciples that Jesus was truly God at that time. And very difficult for them to fully commit to him at that time. It is still very much a problem in today's world.

4. What in this sermon sounded like good news to you? (Feel free to state it in your own words.)

A: Jesus is worth the effort to follow.

B: Faith equals strength. “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” It will work out in His way—not ours—if we stay focused on Him. Cross-eyed focus on Jesus. God is leading and will take care of us – this creates my “calm” with donating to [name].

C: God has a plan, our focus should be on our spirit and let our day by day lives be lived without worry.

D: Be true to yourself – Let God lead and be with you to guide and help; to stand beside you even when you doubt.

E: If you know where to look the answers are there. While others will be focused on earthly things if you focus on Jesus the truth (direction) will be clear.

F: God’s way is the best way.

G: Simply put, Jesus is the focal point of our lives. If we put ourselves in his hands we will be committing to our most important reason to live in his word. That of salvation instead of focusing on the smaller issues we all deal with daily.

5. What did this sermon change for you, or how did it make you feel? What questions does it raise?

A: I know that even contemporaries of Jesus didn’t understand what he was saying.

B: Reassured. No questions, except what else may I have missed by walking away?

C: That although I have doubted God’s plan at times, we all have had these moments. In these times I need to trust that God’s plan and path for me is the only path I need.

D: It made me feel better about decisions I’ve made and about holding firm when I know in my heart I’m doing the right thing. I felt happy and more confident.

E: It reaffirms that when we do not understand we need to trust Jesus. But, as stated in the human condition, while we know this, this is very difficult to do on a continued basis. Great analogy visual with the two “is.” The answers are there.

F: No real change, but strengthened my faith.

G: I must try harder to put Jesus at the forefront of my daily life. Not an easy task but one of paramount importance.

Case Study 4

Date: Sunday September 6, 2015

Sermon Texts: Mark 7:24-37, James 2:1-10, 14-17

Preacher’s Journal Entry – see Appendix C:30

Sermon Manuscript

Years ago, I got to be in a wonderful little play called *The Foreigner*. The play opens with two British men traveling into the American countryside. One of them, my character, Charlie, is going through a really rough time in his life. He really just needs to get away from it all for a while. His friend, Froggy, tells him he’s got just the solution – a little, out-of-the-way bed-and-breakfast he knows. Charlie thinks that’s probably a bad idea – he wants some peace and quiet, and he’s sure, at a little place like that, they will just want to talk to him. Froggy says not to worry, he knows the lady who runs the place, and he’ll think of something.

When they arrive, Charlie gets out of sight, and Froggy starts to talk with the older woman who runs the place, by the name of Betty Meeks. He starts explaining that Charlie will be staying for a while, but that there is no use trying to talk to him, because, well... He’s a foreigner. He doesn’t speak any English. This is the solution he comes up with on the spot – to lie, and say Charlie doesn’t speak English.

Betty says that will be just fine; she'll take good care of him – so Froggy leaves. When Charlie re-emerges, Betty gives him a big, big smile, and then starts talking to him VERY SLOWLY AND VERY LOUDLY. As if that is going to help.

And so it goes through the whole play – she comes on stage, and starts shouting at him very good-naturedly about what he might want for breakfast, or some such thing, and Charlie cringes, and tries to avoid her.

That is a brilliant set-up, for two reasons: one is, this must happen 20 times in the play, and it never failed to get a laugh. It's a brilliant gag. But second, there is actually something deeper going on. I think everyone who sees this play assumes that Betty Meeks has just never met a foreigner before. And, if you think about it, probably every other time someone has had trouble understanding her, it has helped for her to speak VERY DISTINCTLY AND VERY LOUD. So it might not be the cleverest thing to try that on this foreigner, but it isn't completely unreasonable, either.

This is actually a very sympathetic picture of what prejudice looks like, in its most innocent form. Prejudice can simply be the things we say or do because we don't know any better. Because how would we know what to say or do, if we've never been in this situation before? We "pre-judge," because we have to. We're doing our best.

I think it is helpful to make this distinction, between prejudice and prejudice. See if you think it is helpful – to think, on the one hand, about the prejudice that is one of the greatest forces of evil loose in our world, such as the dogmatic racism that all of us have encountered, the dogmatic racism that, in its most extreme form, formed the core of Nazi ideology, that motivated that assassin in Norway a few years ago, and that got hold of that young man in Charleston, South Carolina this summer. On the one hand, that's what prejudice can be. On the other hand, on the far other end of the spectrum, there is Betty-Meeks-style prejudice. The prejudice that makes us all put our foot in our mouth now and then, that not-knowing-any-better that is just part of being human. We use the term prejudice for both, and they are related, but there is a big difference between not knowing better, and hate.

The first claim I want to make this morning is this: I think that we do such a poor job dealing with prejudice in its truly evil forms because none of us want to admit and deal with prejudice in the form it takes *in all of us*. We can't take on prejudice in its demonic form without dealing with prejudice as it affects us all, as just a part of being human.

Keep that in mind, if you would, as we turn to our gospel story. And it is a difficult story. We have a powerful testimony of Jesus here for dealing with prejudice, if we can we can crack it open for our use – or rather, as is often the case, if it can crack us open so that the gospel can get in! Let's try it out.

The first thing we need to notice about this story is who is telling it: this comes from the gospel of Mark. And the gospel of Mark is wonderful, but it can be hard for some of us to read and make sense of. And here's one of the things we get hung up on: Mark is just not concerned that we come away thinking that Jesus always knew everything ahead of time. Mark is just not concerned that we come away thinking Jesus always knew just what to do. And that bothers most of us – frankly, most of us have John's picture of Jesus in our heads, And that is fine, except it trips us up when we are reading Mark. John wants us to see Jesus and think: "this is God in the flesh." And, of course he's right. But Mark wants us to see Jesus and think: "this is what the kingdom of God looks like when it shows up on earth." And, of course, he is right, too.

This difference in approach might be why Mark could include some stories that just wouldn't make sense to the likes of John: like that story of the woman in the crowd who touched the hem of Jesus' robe and was healed – and then Jesus said, "I felt some power go out from me. Who was it that touched me?" Only Mark tells that story – and we wonder what it could mean.

But for today, let's take Mark as Mark. He wants us to see Jesus and say: "This is a new way of being human. This is what humanity is going to look like when the reign of God comes. This is the new human being."

So we have this story of Jesus traveling into foreign territory – the region of Tyre. The people are the ancestors of the modern Syrians and Lebanese. And a woman falls down before him, begging. Her daughter's spirit isn't right within her – something is wrong. Please, Jesus, heal her.

And we've seen this all before – but *this time*, it is a foreigner. Not a Jew. Not someone who already believes in the God whose kingdom Jesus is talking about and bringing in.

She asks for help – she's begging for help. And Jesus says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

And if that doesn't about take your breath away, you are missing something. It may not be intentionally mean, but it comes across as a verbal slap in the face.

I join a long line of preachers who would love to be able to tell you that what Jesus said sounds nicer in the original Greek or Aramaic – but that would be a lie. I've read commentators who want to get around this in every way you can think of. They suggest that Jesus is almost teasing, or joking with the woman. Really? Do you joke around with a woman who is begging for help? Others say he is testing her. Does Jesus test everyone before he helps us? I hope not. Does he test us by seeing how we react to insults? That doesn't ring true to me.

To paraphrase Sherlock Holmes – if you have ruled out everything else, whatever remains, however unpalatable, must be the truth.

It sure looks like we have a story here of Jesus acting prejudiced. And why not? If you set aside the "God knows everything" argument – how would Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Galilean, know how to talk politely to a Syro-Phoenician woman? He's hardly been fifty miles from where he grew up – wouldn't people think it was strange if he suddenly knew everything there is to know about interacting with foreigners?

And Jesus represents well how he understands his mission – the Gentiles – the foreigners – *are going to get included*, but he has to reach the people of Israel *first*. The Gentiles have to wait their turn. That's his plan, his mission from God. It just happens that, when he tells this to the woman, he chooses to talk about the people of Israel as the "children" and the foreigners, he calls "*dogs*." *To her face.*

And then this woman does something amazing. Maybe she has gifts of patience and humility, and is somehow able not to take offense. Maybe she just loves her daughter so much that she will put up with whatever she has to do. But however she finds the ability to do it, she responds, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She says, "I don't have to wait for leftovers later, do I, if I would content with just a crumb now?"

And Jesus heals her daughter. I guess the Gentiles don't have to wait after all.

I don't know about all of you, but I don't like to admit when I am wrong. When I really put my foot in my mouth, *my* favorite strategy is to pretend like nothing happened. Of course sometimes I'm too dense to realize that I've put my foot in my mouth, and then it's actually much easier to pretend like nothing has happened. Why am I so hesitant to admit the prejudices I carry when they are just part of living in this world?

I've seen the comedian Stephen Colbert do a schtick – I guess he is taking over the Late Show this week – I've seen him do a "bit" about how he completely post-racial. That he, in fact, does not see race. And then, to put it over the top, he says, "I only know that he is white because that's what people have told me."

I think he has nailed us. We don't know what to do about prejudice except pretend we don't have any – even the ones that every person on earth has.

But the goal of being born pure and going our whole lives with ever having a prejudiced thought *just doesn't seem to be working out for us*. We need a new strategy!

Now I won't blame any of you if you want to put this gospel story behind you as soon as you can, and go back to that picture of Jesus who somehow always knows ahead of time where things are leading and how they are going to turn out. I don't blame you; I might join you. But what I don't want you to lose is this new picture of what being human could look like as God's reign comes to earth. What if we prejudiced human beings could do like Jesus and do two things: number one, go

places where we are going to have to confront our prejudices, and, number two, admit when we got something wrong and change our mind.

How often do we avoid new people or new situations for fear our prejudices will be challenged, or will be revealed in an embarrassing way? We think, “I won’t go share a meal with the homeless families when they come to the church – I just wouldn’t know what to say.” I am right there with you – but how will we ever know what their lives are like? Anyone who’s been on a mission trip – oh, I hate to think what stupid things we said! And the worst ones, I’m sure, are the ones where we didn’t even realize what we were saying! And how often does this fear stop us in our daily lives? We don’t talk to our classmate of a different religion, because we might say something offensive. We don’t talk to our neighbors of a different background, or to people who don’t speak English.

We stay in our “comfort zones.” We don’t want to come away looking foolish like old Betty Meeks – but see, here’s the brilliance of that play: you come to love old Betty Meeks! Because she is just so excited to meet a foreigner, and so honored to get to look after him.

Again, how are we ever going to confront prejudice in its evil and dangerous forms, If we’re ashamed to confront it in its natural and everyday forms?

If we try this new way of being human, we venture out, and cross boundaries, and then, when we invariably get it wrong, or find out we had it wrong – *we change our minds*.

We have a word for that – when you find out you were wrong about something and then change your mind: it’s called *learning*. And usually, we think it is a good thing.

The good news in this gospel is overflowing – the girl gets healed, salvation comes to the Gentiles... and you and I can venture out, and make mistakes, and learn. Amen.

Sermon Listener Feedback Survey

1. What do you think was this sermon’s understanding of the human condition: the truth about human nature, or the predicament we all find ourselves in? (Please feel free to use your own words, or the preacher’s words as you remember them.)

Respondent A: We misunderstand and we are misunderstood. Prejudice as a result of lack of exposure. Not knowing versus evil prejudice.

B: What does prejudice look like? There are two sides of prejudice: racism versus just not knowing what to do with someone who is different and unknown. Hate versus ignorance (part of being human).

C: We prejudge. Two extremes: Not knowing better and/or hate. Human nature is part of the Kingdom of God on Earth. We can learn and change our ways.

D: We all fail to see the prejudice in our own lives.

E: Even at our most innocent, we can still be hurtful. The sermon uses the fact that as humans we are still hurtful to others through prejudice.

F: Prejudice: Truly not knowing or hate. What do we do when put in the position of prejudice. What can we learn from it?

G: Prejudice exists in us all and in different forms. Prejudice ranges from evil conscious intent to unconscious actions and ignorant statements. Example of play “The Foreigner” was helpful to see how easy it is to assume things and to act on those assumptions without getting the facts.

2. Was that description of the human condition something you could relate to? How strongly did it resonate with you? Where does it connect with your own life and experiences?

A: Lack of exposure may result from cloistered existence – from middle class home, to college, to work with professionals, to middle class retirement.

B: Could absolutely relate. I want to believe I have no prejudice yet I find I judge often out of fear. I also wrestle with the fact that I don’t know what to do for the suffering ones. I also am afraid to confront the prejudice. I feel guilty about not standing up for others.

C: Certainly points out my own stupidity. I try to have good intentions. I fall very short when I fear someone unlike myself. Good intentions fall short.

D: It is part of all human life. We all bear the scarring prejudices we are exposed to throughout life.

E: Yes. I can relate to how innocent we are when you don't know how to deal with a situation.

F: I can relate to the human condition of prejudice everyday with working in the school system. I see lots of kids every day and try my best to treat each of them with God's love no matter how they look and act.

G: Yes. Prejudice exists everywhere and in everyone to varying extents. Important to listen, read, and learn so we can decrease prejudice and/or rid ourselves of bias actions, words, and deeds.

3. Is there anything you can remember in today's reading(s) from the Bible that connects to this understanding of the human condition?

A: "Throw children's bread to the dogs" – Jesus' human nature exposed. Congregational misbehavior in James.

B: Even Jesus had prejudice.

C: If even the human Jesus fell prey to human nature, how can we not expect to make mistakes, but we need to correct them as He did.

D: The way people treat others according to the world's view and not God's.

E: When Jesus was mean to the Gentile woman, I think it reflects very well how people treat other people.

F: Learn from our mistakes and prejudices. We will all be better for it.

G: People from all walks of life experience prejudice, i.e. race, cultural differences, mental handicaps, physical handicaps, educational levels.

4. What in this sermon sounded like good news to you? (Feel free to state it in your own words.)

A: God can overcome our mistakes, particularly when they are well intentioned.

B: The fact that even Jesus had prejudice and overcame it. It seems that there would then be grace for me to learn to overcome my own prejudice and fear in the face of it.

C: I must admit my shortcomings (sins) and do better.

D: I, a gentile, can receive the mercy of God.

E: That everyone, Gentile or Jew, will be brought to the kingdom of God.

F: Go places and confront our prejudices! Admit when we are wrong and grow from it.

G: God's love is unconditional. Jesus does not test us (good works alone are not needed) to see if we are worthy of his love and grace and salvation.

5. What did this sermon change for you, or how did it make you feel? What questions does it raise?

A: Raised awareness that I need to put conscious effort into interacting with "strangers."

B: Really raised my awareness and gave voice to my fear and powerless feeling in the face of all of the prejudice being highlighted in the world today.

C: Made me realize that prejudice is not only hate. We are taught to love everyone, not just those like us.

D: We "gentiles" always need to remember we are the "wild vine" and only a part of the family of God, due to his mercy.

E: I am very happy, knowing that prejudice is human nature and God will always forgive us. I will now try even harder to admit that I can be wrong, and will embrace humility.

F: This sermon made me reflect on what I do and say on a daily basis. Am I too judgmental of others? What I say rubs off on my own children! It reminds me how to live every day! What would Jesus do? And say?

G: Important to go forth and confront our prejudices. Important to admit we are wrong and learn from our mistakes.

Case Study 5

Date: Sunday September 6, 2015

Sermon Texts: Mark 7:24-37; James 2:1-10, 14-17

Preacher's Journal Entry – see Appendix C:29

Sermon Manuscript

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, grace and peace to you from the Triune God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jane Austen was an author in Georgian England. Her novels are love stories set among the landed gentry, but Austen uses these stories as a means to comment on the social realities and conditions of her time. **SLIDE 1 (Elizabeth and Darcy)** Perhaps her best known and most loved work is *Pride and Prejudice*. It tells the story of Miss Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. There are obstacles, of course – there are always obstacles right – to their relationship, including their difference in social standing. But ultimately what nearly prevents their relationship is the pride and prejudice of both of them. Almost from the beginning, the two misunderstand and misinterpret each other's attitudes and comments. They do not know each other and so they read into each other's behavior their own prejudices. Upon discovering this, Elizabeth exclaims, "How despicably have I acted! I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities...How humiliating is this discovery! yet, how just a humiliation! Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly."

SLIDE 2 (blank) The reading from Mark's gospel this morning picks up right where we left off last week. In fact, we might consider this week's reading a test case of Jesus' teaching. Remember, last week Jesus took the Pharisees to task for their understanding and interpretation of purity laws. He offers this teaching instead: "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." But what are we to do when what is considered unclean is not a food or a particular ritual or lack of ritual, but a person or even a group of people? Jesus has travelled north and has an encounter with a Gentile woman whose daughter is possessed by a demon. When she seeks healing for her daughter, Jesus dismisses her, rather rudely, calling her a dog.

His dismissal of this Gentile woman is in keeping with the tensions that existed between Jews and Gentiles. Jesus simply gives voice to the prejudices of his day and his people. The truth is, this story from Mark is a little odd. It's not at all in keeping with our image of Jesus as the all-compassionate, all merciful, every-ready-to-lend-a-helping-hand Savior. And so we want to gloss over this statement of Jesus, or to make apologies for him, and jump right to the part of the story where Jesus does what we expect him to do – to jump right to the healing part of the story. But if we do that we run the risk of only ever seeing Jesus, and the kingdom of God, through the lens of our own expectations.

I wonder if what makes us uncomfortable with this passage is that Jesus seems a little too human in it. After all, we too have at times discounted people, entire groups of people, because they were somehow different, somehow other than we are. If you don't believe me, turn on the news.

SLIDE 3 (blank) How many of the day's headlines are reporting on the consequences of just this behavior? **CLICK (shooting victims at Mother Emanuel)** Think about the headlines that deal with racial tensions or the racially motivated violence that has erupted over the past year. **CLICK (Elephant and donkey)** Think about some of the political candidates and their speeches that, at their best, give voice to stereotypes and prejudices about or against entire groups of people and at their worst speak outright lies. Nor is this a uniquely American problem. **CLICK (migrants)**

Think about the headlines coming out of Europe. The desperate migrants. Today we hear the cry of the Syrophonician woman through the voices of the Syrian refugees as they lament their dead and seek to find relief from years of war while European leaders bicker over whose problem they are.

SLIDE 4 (Holy Spirit image) I am just starting a class this fall on the Holy Spirit. In the syllabus the professor writes, "Everything we do in this course revolves around the following question: Who is the Holy Spirit and how is the Spirit present and active in the church, our lives, and throughout the world?" I see the work of the Spirit in this story. I suppose if I were to ask you to name the miracle that took place in this story you might refer to the healing. And indeed, the healing of the Gentile girl is a miracle. But I want to suggest that this is a kind of secondary miracle. I think the real miracle is that the kingdom of God broke forth in an unexpected place and in an unanticipated time. And when the kingdom of God breaks forth healing and reconciliation happen. This revealing of the kingdom of God is certainly the work of the Spirit. How does the Spirit accomplish this revealing of the kingdom? Well let's look at the story again. Whatever prejudices or motivations lay behind Jesus' comment to the Syrophonician woman, the story didn't end there. I think the Spirit was active in the words of this Gentile woman. In what can only be described as a bold and courageous move, she challenges Jesus. She stands up for herself against the commonly held prejudices of her day. **CLICK (#Syrophonicianlivesmatter)** She asserts her own dignity. **CLICK (#Syrophonicianwomen'slivesmatter)** , and she fiercely fights to get her daughter some relief, **CLICK (#mamabear.)**

And I see the Spirit at work in the words and actions of Jesus. There is a sharp boundary separating the Jews and the Gentiles. Jesus knows this, he is the one in the story who draws attention to it. But empowered by the Spirit, Jesus becomes a trespasser, a crosser of boundaries. In response to the woman's challenge Jesus adheres to his own teaching about purity. It is not a person's nationality or race or gender that makes a person unclean. And so he heals the woman's daughter. **CLICK (#nolongerJewnorGreek)** This act of trespassing, of breaching the ethnic and racial boundaries becomes the missionary focus of the early church as Christianity spreads beyond Judaism to the Gentle world. **CLICK (#InChristthereisnoeastorwest)**

And just as I see the presence of the Spirit in this story so to do I see the presence and activity of the Spirit in our world today. **SLIDE 5 (Holy Spirit Coming)** The Spirit continues the work in our world of breaking down barriers and bringing all people together, of pointing out how our pride and prejudices are keeping us separated from one another. When we too, like Elizabeth Bennet, cry out, "how despicably have I acted," then the Spirit is at work in us, revealing to us, helping us to see the new creation, the kingdom of God in which all are children of God and therefore brothers and sisters to each other.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed in the face of such large issues as racism and immigration. You are probably not going to be able to single-handedly solve these problems, but that does not mean you should do nothing. "Faith without works is dead," writes James. Or we might say, our faith is active in love. You can address the pride and prejudices in your own lives. Empowered by the Spirit you too can become a trespasser, a crosser-of-boundaries, one who reaches out to the other. When boundaries are crossed and fences that hedge you in are taken down, reconciliation and new life become possible and will burst forth in unexpected ways and at unanticipated times. You will see and be a part of the work of the Spirit, you will catch a glimpse of the kingdom. Amen.

Sermon Listener Feedback Survey

1. What do you think was this sermon's understanding of the human condition: the truth about human nature, or the predicament we all find ourselves in? (Please feel free to use your own words, or the preacher's words as you remember them.)

Respondent A: The sermon emphasized how it is important to be open to change your mind about things when you learn things which challenge your world view. Example was where Elizabeth Bennet changed her mind about Darcy.

B: We tend to “trip” on our pride and prejudice. We have developed filters or blinders to our own actions on others.

2. Was that description of the human condition something you could relate to? How strongly did it resonate with you? Where does it connect with your own life and experiences?

A: Yes. As an adult it is easy to be “set in your ways,” and it is good to be able to reconsider your biases when reality challenges them.

B: With the use of PowerPoint it was clear we are a part of pride and prejudice by what our world news indicates.

3. Is there anything you can remember in today’s reading(s) from the Bible that connects to this understanding of the human condition?

A: This reconsideration is modeled by Jesus in the Gospel reading.

B: Jesus loved everyone: women, children, deaf and dumb, etc. His view of people was BEYOND Pride and Prejudice. Great model for all of us.

4. What in this sermon sounded like good news to you? (Feel free to state it in your own words.)

A: Yes. Anything that pushes for openness to change is good news to me.

B: We can replicate and live God’s love through our informed actions.

5. What did this sermon change for you, or how did it make you feel? What questions does it raise?

A: Though not a main focus of the sermon, this sermon raised questions about Jesus’ ability to change, with respect to the relationship between Jesus’ divine and human natures and the divine foreknowledge of God.

B: We all suffer from pride and prejudice by default. Our “human” nature requires God’s guidance and love. We cannot reflect ourselves; we need to reflect God’s love.

Case Study 6

Date: Sunday October 4, 2015

Sermon Texts: Psalm 8

Preacher’s Journal Entry – see Appendix C:14

Sermon Manuscript

I usually take it as a good sign when people start asking the deep questions: “What was there before God began creating?” “Where did evil come from?” “If God shows grace to undeserving people, how can that be fair?”

There is one deep question, though, that we almost never think to ask: “Why did God make humans?” It seems kind of obvious, once you say it – that should be one of the deep questions. There didn’t have to be humans. Why did God do it?

But it’s not one we ask, and that right there ought to tell us something about humans. For us, asking the question, “Why did God make humans?” is kind of like asking a kid, “Why are your parents here? What makes them happy?” “Well, of course, they exist to take care of me! And making me happy makes them happy!”

Well, for us, that is what God is like; that is what God is for – to make us, to take care of us, to make us happy.

But maybe we need to think again. Why did God create humans? It’s a good question. Creation was humming along. It already had all the good things we like. To most of us, we would say it was a paradise. Why mess it all up with human beings? Why take the risk?

Why God made us in the first place is one of the questions Psalm 8 teaches us to ask. I want to walk through the Psalm with you for a minute or two – it's nice sometimes to take the time to really make a passage like this your own, to get it familiar, so you can come back to it and remember what it has taught you before. Take a look at your handout, so you can follow along. It begins as it ends – "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" The next verse is a difficult one. Different translations come at it from different directions. But I came across one that spoke to me this week. This verse might mean something like, "whenever a newborn creature cries out, you strike a blow against your enemies, the forces of chaos." So it might be a poetic reference to God's on-going acts of creation.

Verse 3 talks about the works of God's fingers – a little allusion there, a little reminder that Genesis one says human beings are in the "image of God."

Verse 4 is a little ambiguous here – we might be talking about humanity represented by one person, or we might be talking about literally just one person. And the term, "son of man" is used here, and that is just a wonderful poetic phrase. If you have read *The Chronicles of Narnia*, then you know that the girls are called "daughters of Eve," and the boys are called "sons of Adam." The term "son of man" is like that.

Verse 5 is sometimes rendered to say humans are "a little lower than the heavenly beings" or angels – or it might mean "a little less than divine."

Then in verses 7 and 8, you can see these concentric circles forming – like when you throw a rock into a pond. The circles move outward. The start close to humanity – we have dominion over pets and livestock, but also wild animals; and birds that fly and fish that swim, we can affect, them, too; and even, well, whatever it is out there in the deep seas.

So this reflection on who we are, who human beings are, has two parts. The first part is to realize, in the vastness of things, how insignificant we are. You've had these experiences. James Limburg calls this "a stargazer's Psalm." You've been out in nature, out under the stars, pondering the work of God's fingers, and you say, "whoa... I'm a tiny speck."

A few years ago, we had a confirmation retreat, and got out to camp after dinner, and we watched a movie, so we were up late, and I wanted the kids to have that experience, so we read this Psalm, and went out under the stars, and let our eyes adjust to the darkness. And I think we who were there will all remember that. We were all thinking the same thing: "Is that a strobe light? Why did the Catholic youth group in the next cabin bring a strobe light to camp?"

My brother is a professor of astronomy, and he is often asked to give public lectures. Why do we want to hear from the astronomers? People come. They like to listen to him. And he tries to talk in ways that people can understand, but the size of these numbers, these size relationships – people are completely lost. It's way over most of our heads. But then you realize – that's why they come. It's wonderful and breathtaking to be in the presence of things, vast things, far beyond your comprehension.

"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them? What are mortals that you care for them?" God and creation are so vast, and we are so insignificant. That's the first part of the reflection on humanity: "We're so tiny, why do you bother with us at all?"

That's the first half, realizing how insignificant we are. But the second half is asking, "Why did God put humanity in charge?" Why turn us loose on creation, and on each other? This is some experiment you are running with your creation, God!

And in asking that question, the Psalm begins to tell why we are here. It says, "you have given them dominion over the works of your hands." Dominion. In the Bible, dominion is always a word about responsibility, not a right to do what we want with something, but a responsibility to take care of it. In making human beings – be it advisable or not – God has delegated some power. But we have to remember, this is some of God's power and authority we are given, so it is to be used for God's purposes.

So that's the reflection the Psalmist wrote thousands of years ago. A pair of reflections on humanity: insignificance, and dominion; amazement that God notices us, and amazement that God has given us big responsibilities.

But If David (or whoever wrote this Psalm) saw the stars and thought those thoughts, how much more should we, who know so much more of the infinite vastness of the universe marvel that God cares for us? If the Psalmist, who knew only basic agriculture and hunting, marveled at what God allowed humanity to do, how much more should we marvel at the power we now have, for good or for ill.

This Psalm tells us who we are.

I've been thinking about this this week. I don't feel quite as hopeful as this Psalm does about humanity. We had another shooting in this country. Another shooting. And we are heartsick, again, at this tragedy. We have had so, so many this summer. It feels like something is wrong in the fabric of humanity. Then on the larger scale, we have wars that drag on and on. And other wars that seemed to have ended, only to start again. Even closer to home: the gospel reading reminds us of divorce, and brings up so much personal suffering, there's so little that can be done about it, by the church, and by the people who don't want it to happen. It reminds me of a phrase despondent people say: "I think I am losing my faith in humanity." Who's idea was it to make humanity? Who's idea, to give humanity so much power and authority... to do so much harm?

This Psalm names the paradox of humanity: we who should be insignificant are not, carrying great capacity to do good or harm.

But it also contains a faith conviction: God is mindful.

This Psalm uses that technical term for humanity: Son of Man. We know that term. We know it as the term Jesus most often uses for himself. Once we see Jesus in this Psalm, we see him everywhere: Jesus is the one who was willing to make himself, for a while,

A little lower than the angels. He gave up majesty, and only later was crowned with glory and honor (the honor that he alone among human beings actually deserves).

Jesus comes to show what "dominion" should look like. "The Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve." "Whoever wants to be first, should be last of all, and servant of all." Servant of all flocks and herds, servant of all beasts of the field, servant of all the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, and all that swim in the paths of the seas. Dominion in Scripture always means first and foremost responsibility, and Jesus could not put a finer point on it.

This Psalm may not solve the mystery of humanity, but it does reveal God – willing to "step lower," to exercise "dominion" in the form service to the weaker, to care for those who seem insignificant. Only in knowing this God who is mindful of us, and cares for us can we begin to truly understand who we are. We aren't "a little less than divine" by our own accomplishments. We aren't in dominion over the earth and its creatures because of our inherent good sense, or because of our trustworthiness, or strength or fitness to rule. We aren't significant in the scheme of things at all – except that we are significant in the eyes of God. "Who are mortals that you are mindful of them? Human beings that you care for them?"

"Faith in humanity" – while I know what is meant by that – strictly speaking, that may be faith misplaced. This Psalm (especially the second half) is about God's faith in humanity. Better yet, when we consider Jesus – God's *hope* in humanity: what humanity can become, worthy of its position caring for the whole earth, managing the creatures and the resources of God's creation, and taking responsibility for one another.

The only humanity worth having faith in is one being transformed by the Son of Man – where dominion is exercised as service, where love is shown in imitation of God by caring about those who are called insignificant.

As Christians, the better question we might ask is: "Who are human beings that you would become one of us? Mortals, that you would allow us, sometimes, to reflect your glory and honor, as Christ works in us?"

"Faith in humanity" isn't quite the right phrase – this is why we speak of "Faith in God."

The God who made humanity out of love, longing for a partner, and elevated humanity out of hope for what we could be, and then, in love, joined us, to make us worthy partners... and loves us still, until this world is redeemed.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Sermon Listener Feedback Survey

1. What do you think was this sermon's understanding of the human condition: the truth about human nature, or the predicament we all find ourselves in? (Please feel free to use your own words, or the preacher's words as you remember them.)

Respondent A: We are mortals, we are made less than divine. Why do we matter? Dominion – humans have responsibility to take care of creation with the power of God. Humanity in the Psalm represents all ages. Man continues to struggle in today's world as burdened by violence, broken relationships, racism, undermining of Christian presence in government, schools.

B: Faith statement: God cares about humanity – he sent his Son to show us what dominion should look like. Jesus through his service shows us. We tend to put ourselves at the center and forget our responsibilities.

C: Through us, “created a little lower than the angels,” the God of the universe uses us to save all creation.

D: We are less than divine, not perfect, not without sin. We don't have all the answer – we have questions. We are insignificant. Humanity is evil in things we do to each other – Not what God planned for humanity.

E: We do not want to think of why God created us and allowed evil to fester. We don't know why we are here. Where are we on the “holy chain”? (Less divine than angels.)

F: Great deep questions: “Where does evil come from?” Why did God make HUMANITY? Why are we here? It is our responsibility, from God, to serve others. Why did God let us be in charge? To let us see that we CANNOT live without having FAITH in him. God is mindful, he sent his son to die for us. We must be faithful servants.

G: Why did god make humanity? Humanity insignificant versus humanity responsible for so much. Who are we as human beings?

2. Was that description of the human condition something you could relate to? How strongly did it resonate with you? Where does it connect with your own life and experiences?

A: Each day on media sources we hear about murder, theft, violence, attacks against others because of their religious beliefs, their station in life, their race. Large part of different political party debates is pro-life versus pro-choice.

B: I'm not as hopeful about humanity this week as the psalmist – losing faith in humanity. Thank you for addressing the shootings and ongoing wars. I have been heartsick this week. (Disconsolate is a good work for it.)

C: A speck in the universe, but the Lord created us only as “a little lower than the angels.”

D: I am sinful and turn to God to save, forgive, and protect me.

E: We don't know how to use the power God has given us. We are trying to cope with the power and understand why we have dominion over so much. This resonates very deeply, because everyone wants to know why we are here, and why we can create and destroy so easily.

F: Yes. We have choices every day, to do good or to cause harm. We don't always mean to cause harm but our words can cut like a knife. Being with students and teachers all day I find it difficult at times to say the right things. When I pray to ask God for the right words whether I'm at school or at home he always follows through.

G: I could relate. Thinking about my responsibility and call to service.

3. Is there anything you can remember in today's reading(s) from the Bible that connects to this understanding of the human condition?

A: People should not live in isolations from others (Genesis 2:18-24). The disciples wanted to protect Jesus from those they did not think were important (Mark 10:2-16). It is human nature to be selective in relationships that we believe do not share our values, our beliefs, or may do us future harm.

B: Vastness of creation and the insignificance of human existence. I appreciate that you brought it back to the need to follow Jesus' model: "Give us faith to be more faithful."

C: Salvation through the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus, only, and grace.

D: God gave us power over creation.

E: How God allowed Adam to name every animal and even his own wife and companion.

F: Jesus calls himself Son of Man. Because of this humanity is transformed.

G: In Christ's coming, we may be transformed. Jesus said come, come to the smallest and weakest, the children.

4. What in this sermon sounded like good news to you? (Feel free to state it in your own words.)

A: God is all powerful, and though we fail in so many ways – he remains constant. Trials and tribulations are part of our human experience but God prevails in all things.

B: Don't lose track of whose power it is, and what is his purpose for us? We aren't significant at all except in God's eyes. Have faith in God—his hope for humanity—as shown through Jesus.

C: God gives us life and responsibility ("a blessing and what can be a curse.")

D: Jesus came to save us from our human nature. God's hope for humanity.

E: That even though we do destroy many things, we still have the power to create and fix our mistakes, and that God is always mindful of humanity, and loves us no matter what.

F: Despite the evil in the world we need to continue to have faith in God to guide us daily.

G: God is mindful and cares for humanity. God will support us and equip us for the responsibility we have been given.

5. What did this sermon change for you, or how did it make you feel? What questions does it raise?

A: There is always hope for humanity no matter the degree and frequency of human foibles, suffering, and trials. God had a plan for all of us – we will never fully understand his plan for each of us – but we matter to God.

B: (Verse 2: protection – new creation against enemies.) Think in a different way – consider how much more we understand about the vastness of creation – How much more responsible? It made me think about the paradox of the human condition.

C: To realize we, as his creation, have a responsibility to all creation. To work for God's will throughout creation.

D: Why did God create Man and give him power of His creation? For me: I must be more responsible for God's creation AND to other people.

E: I felt very exposed but still comforted, by the fact that we can fix our mistakes, and God will love me even when I make a mistake.

F: It reaffirmed for me to trust my faith in God and continue to pray for our world.

Case Study 7

Date: Sunday October 11, 2015

Sermon Texts: Mark 10:17-31

Preacher's Journal Entry – see Appendix C:41

Sermon Manuscript

It's an exciting day when you learn to count. We do a lot of counting at our house. The other day [Name] was volunteering at the school, getting kids lined up for their hearing and vision tests. A

bunch of kindergarten boys burst into the hallway – they didn’t know who she was, but that didn’t matter – they were excited! “We just learned math!” one of the gushed. “100 plus 100 is 200!” one told her. “200 plus 200 is 400!” said the next. “400 plus 400 is 600!” the next one told her. Hmmm...

Learning to count really does open up a new view of the world. You can see patterns that weren’t there before quantities were assigned. You have some control over things you can count. But... we can count too much, and for the wrong reasons. Once you can count, you begin to see *more...* and *less...* And what you want is *more...*

Before you count, having enough is a feeling of contentment. Isn’t it so easy though – when you start counting – isn’t it so easy for “*enough*” to become *a number*? No longer a feeling of contentment, but an amount?

We hear this story of Jesus – often called the story of the “rich young man,” – and we should know this is an honest question he asks of Jesus. He means well. He really has kept the commandments – Jesus doesn’t say he hasn’t. He kneels before Jesus, and Jesus looks at him and loves him – looks at him and loves him – what an important detail – Jesus looks on him and loves him.

But something is wrong. This call to discipleship is not answered. The man went away grieving. And that’s when we find out: he had many possessions.

The rich man *had counted*. Maybe he didn’t have enough. Maybe he was almost there, to that number that would feel like security. He had many possessions. When Jesus said, “sell what you have and give the money to the poor,” The man knew *how much* he would have to give.

One of the most fascinating polls that has been taken across several decades shows a very steady pattern: the richer a person is, the more money they give away – no big shock there – but also, the richer a person is, the smaller *percentage of their income* they give away. That’s surprising, I think, when we first hear it. That richer people give away less of their income, as a percentage, and poorer people give away more of their income. Right now, the top 20% income earners give away, on average, between 1 and 1.5% of their income, and that ranges down to between 3 and 3.5% of income for the lowest 20% income earners. That’s been a consistent trend for years and years. The question is, “why?”

There are lots of theories. One is basically “sticker shock.” The theory goes that, even if it is a small percentage of your income or your accumulated assets, the bigger the check, the harder it is to write. The bigger the number on the bill, the harder it is to fork it over.

That may be part of it, but the evidence points to another factor – it is simply this:

Poor people see other people in need *all the time*, and so *they help*. Richer people don’t see people in need all that often, and if they do, they don’t relate to their problems – and so *they don’t help*.

Part of the evidence for this is that the poorer you are, the more likely that the group you are giving to is a church or an agency assisting the poor. The more wealth you have, the less likely you are to see people in need very often, and the less likely you are to think they are anything like you.

“How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.” It sounds like Jesus is being harsh with this man, doesn’t it? It seems like he is asking a lot. He is. But part of this directive Jesus gives him is actually an *invitation*: an invitation to see other human beings for who they are, and to understand their needs, and *to enter into a relationship with them*.

Jesus isn’t proposing selling all he has and giving it to the poor as a abstract notion: he’s proposing parting with *actual material objects*, and giving the proceeds to *real, feeling, breathing humans*. Jesus is saying, “You’ve kept all of God’s commandments – now look around and see these brothers and sisters God has given you.”

We need to learn to count differently. We need to learn to count different things. We need to learn from Jesus: sharing money and possessions isn’t a transaction, it’s a relationship.

Jesus teaches his disciples to count. Peter said: “Look, Jesus – we have left everything and followed you.” And he is in earnest – and Jesus doesn’t contradict him. They *have* left everything.

And Jesus says, “Truly I tell you: there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold – now, in this age – houses, brothers or sisters, mothers or children, and fields...”

Now how is that possible? (It’s a good thing he didn’t put husbands and wives in there, Or we’d really be confused.) But really – “you will receive a hundredfold mothers” – what? And then I realize... I have. Thankfully, I’m blessed that I’ve gotten to keep the one I left – if that makes any sense – but I’ve had mothers and mothers all along, all through my life, God has given me mothers. Some of you are here this morning – thanks for coming. Nice to see you.

Can you learn to count like this? How many mothers and fathers have you been given? And children, to pass on what you’ve been given?

How many homes has God opened for you? Jesus says, when we follow him, we have a hundred houses for every one we left. Around this world, how many doors would open to you in hospitality in the name of Jesus Christ? You have a lot of houses. For every one experience of hospitality you have had, of someone welcoming you in, there are surely a hundred more who *would* do it.

How is that possible? *We are going to have to learn to count differently.* This is how God provides for us. It’s not: “You get what you’re due. And *you* get what *you*’re due...” *It’s not a transaction. God providing for us is a relationship,* And it is done *through* relationships. *Just like giving away our money and sharing our possessions: It’s not a transaction – it’s a relationship.* A relationship with a God who cares, and loves to provide.

How much more we will have to learn as we return to the question that started it all: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” said the man. We want so badly to understand the *equations* of salvation. We really do try to turn theology into a math puzzle – *then* we would feel like we had some control over it.

Most of the ways we end up talking about salvation make it sound like there are quantities involved: Jesus moving set amounts from our side of some ledger over to his side of the ledger, and zeroing the balance. We have to learn to count differently.

It must have been 10 or 15 years ago, but I still think of it often: in the course of conversation, when my oldest brother said, with clear frustration: “I’m tired of hearing people talk about their faith the way they talk about their retirement accounts.”

It rang true to me, and exposes all the faulty ways we try to tame and control our relationship with God – as if it were a *transaction*. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Yet, Jesus promises to those who follow him – “all you need in this world, a hundredfold – and in the world to come, eternal life.” *Receiving eternal life isn’t a transaction: it’s a relationship.*

Some things we thought we knew, we will need to learn again: not to count what we have, but to count what friends we can make with what God has given us; not to count whether God has given us what we are owed, but to see the abundance God has surrounded us with, in the fellowship of the church, and among all people of goodwill. We’ll have to learn not to count up points as we follow commandments, not to count Jesus’ merit against our sin, but to count on this God for whom all things are possible, to count on this God who provides a hundredfold all we need, to count on Jesus, who looks on us in love. Jesus looks on us in love, and *that is enough.* Amen.

Sermon Listener Feedback Survey

1. What do you think was this sermon’s understanding of the human condition: the truth about human nature, or the predicament we all find ourselves in? (Please feel free to use your own words, or the preacher’s words as you remember them.)

Respondent A: We as humans often enjoy being served more than serving. To give up our personal wealth (which we often feel we have “earned” for ourselves), our personal freedoms and often our status to serve others is felt to be too much of a sacrifice.

B: It is difficult to give up all we have and follow Jesus even though we know He gave all for us. The more a person has, the more difficult the decision.

C: The sermon is about remembering what we already know – that our relationship with God is one we can trust. We knew trust as a child – it was second nature.

2. Was that description of the human condition something you could relate to? How strongly did it resonate with you? Where does it connect with your own life and experiences?

A: Often I refer to “my” money and “my” time not only in speaking, but in my thoughts. This scripture explained more fully gave me a larger “picture” understanding and AGAIN a reminder that I am not “giving up” anything: the talents, time, and gifts I have do not belong to me – they are only “on loan gifts” from God’s gracious hand. They increase as I realize all He has provided for me – especially through the people he has given me throughout my life who have served as examples.

B: Yes. When I was young with a family to raise and educate, I would have had great difficulty in casting away all that I had in worldly possessions or leave my family to follow Jesus. Today, it would not be as difficult, but I feel I would be able to do so.

C: The world slowly erodes that trust and we forget what we know as a child.

3. Is there anything you can remember in today’s reading(s) from the Bible that connects to this understanding of the human condition?

A: The rich man exemplifies the self-sufficiency each of us often displays. Our “payments” are our honoring Him and to let go of singing our own praises and boast of what we often think of as “ours.”

B: Jesus faced all the temptations we have and more. He is the only perfect person, and He will have mercy on us. He will find grace to help us. (Hebrews reading)

C: Jesus loves the rich young man, just as he is.

4. What in this sermon sounded like good news to you? (Feel free to state it in your own words.)

A: A reminder that all our lives we have been rewarded due to our performance (grades, trophies, honors, salaries) – and that these were given to me because God provided opportunities for me to use these talents which He originally gave me. It’s in using the rewards from these opportunities to honor Him is what creates the relationship He wants me to have with Him – to realize my faith and trust in Him grows daily as I realize He is the giver and wants me to do the same.

B: We can count on Jesus who loves us. God provides for us through relationship with Him.

C: When we get that relationship with God the tension of “keeping score” disappears.

5. What did this sermon change for you, or how did it make you feel? What questions does it raise?

A: A re-emphasis in understanding Jesus’ desire for us to set aside our “wants” (which we often term as “needs”) which we feel give us security and instead realize they are gifts from Him originally – and to follow Him – which is our eternal security. God does not save us because of what we have or what great things we may have done – but His joy comes when we surrender our will to Him to build a greater relationship—which costs us nothing materially—but allows us to receive all He desires for us to have in Him.

B: More introspection and truthful inspection of myself and my faith was how this sermon impacted me. I ask myself: how can I better serve and follow Jesus?

C: It reminded me of something very important: that a relationship built on mutual trust is a foundation for a joyful life.

Case Study 8

Date: Sunday November 1, 2015

Sermon Texts: John 11:32-44

Preacher's Journal Entry –see Appendix C:61

Sermon Manuscript

When someone dies, we can't help but obsess a little bit about the details. We replay events, trying to make sense of events that will not make sense.

That's how it is in this story of Lazarus. We get the kind of details that stick in your mind. Twice John mentions that Lazarus had been in the tomb *four days* when Jesus arrived. And, earlier in the chapter, he was careful to mention: when Jesus got the message from Mary and Martha that their brother was ill, that Jesus got the message and then stayed *two more days* where he was, across the Jordan River.

He stayed two more days in the place where he was... By the time he got there, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days... This is the kind of thing we can turn over and over in our minds: could he have made it if he left right away? No – it doesn't add up. He could have gotten there sooner, but not in time. The same kinds of things we might ask: maybe there was an earlier flight I could have caught... What if someone had called 911 right away?

Perhaps those kinds of thoughts were troubling Mary as she sat in her house that day – but her vacant gaze showed no sign of clear thought. Her arms hung limp. Her eyes were red and swollen, but there were no more tears. She hadn't been able to sleep, but neither was she awake. Then a neighbor burst in – “Mary! Your rabbi friend is here! He's talking to Martha! He's coming this way!” Now she blinked. She gasped. And before she knew it, she was weeping again, before Jesus even arrived, as if the news of her brother's death was fresh again.

In those four days, the sisters had done all they could to find closure: by the time Lazarus had died, others sat with them. They closed his eyes. They prayed, and they wept. Then they began the preparations: they washed his body in the traditional way. The other women of Bethany and some relatives came to help them. They carefully wrapped the body in scented cloths – much more natural than making a mummy, but probably a somewhat similar appearance to us.

They asked each other again and again if they could have gotten Jesus there sooner – if they should have known – if they could have sent for him sooner. But no. There is nothing they could have done.

They wrapped his body in a position of peaceful rest, and then they made a procession – they wept some more, prayed some more, and came to the tomb. They laid him in it, and strong men placed the stone, and sealed it. When they could weep no more, they went home.

They had done all they could do to find closure, to put to rest their churning thoughts, to make their peace. Of course it wasn't enough, but what can you expect?

For us, also, closure is the best we can do. Anyone who has ever counseled with me about grief can tell you that a big part of what I am going to try to help you do is get some closure – to get some rest from those spinning thoughts and questions, and to make your peace with the situation, and start finding a way forward. I know I miss a lot of opportunities – when people are grieving and I may not know, or I just may not know how to reach out, but when I do, I try to help people get some closure. Far too many people don't – their grief is like an open wound. They suffer without any progress, they get stuck in the past.

So if someone gets to the point of making peace, I want to defend that. I want to protect that, and keep them there. I find myself standing with Martha, who is so often the voice of reason, the voice of wisdom: when Jesus says, “remove the stone,” she says, “Jesus, we don't want to do that. Think practically.”

I admire her restraint – that she doesn't go on to say: "Why would you want to do that to us? Can't you let us grieve in peace? Maybe, if you had come sooner, you could have made it for the funeral, but you didn't. You missed it, Jesus. So we're not opening this up again for you, or for anybody else."

Closure is the best we can do. It is hard-earned, and dear to us when it comes. It is always incomplete, and it is always a little fragile, so we have to protect it. We tell ourselves to accept it: it's the best we can expect.

But God has a way of opening what we have closed. We see it first when Jesus arrives – Mary's tears well up – that well of tears, that had gone dry, is open again. And then the strangest thing happens – remember, there was a funeral just four days ago, when they processed together to the tomb – but now, when Jesus starts walking to the tomb, the procession forms – again! Only this time, instead of following the body of Lazarus, the people are following Jesus.

And in this procession, we hear some of the talk from the people at the back. In this procession, people are sensing the excitement of this moment, but also the absurdity: some say it's beautiful; others say it's bizarre. Some say, "isn't this rabbi wonderful; he's a man, just like us; he weeps for his friend!" And others say, "what good is a wonderful rabbi if he doesn't show up on time? What good is he now?"

And all this high expectation and awkwardness comes to a head when Jesus says, "remove the stone." And they look at one another – who is going to tell Jesus this is too much, he's gone too far? Surely no one is going to *do* it?

And Martha, the wisest one, says, "Jesus, no one's glad Lazarus is in there, but what can we really expect? Our hearts are broken, but we have to move on."

But God insists on opening what we have closed. We have to comfort ourselves, that our loved one's pain is over, but God promises a day when mourning and crying and pain *will be no more*. We have to be content when, exhausted, we shed our last tear, but God says, "I will wipe every tear from their eyes." We have to move on when we are able to accept the fact of death, but God says, "Death will be no more," and God will not be content until that is true. God opens what we have had to close.

I had a professor in seminary who I was blessed to count also as a friend. He was one of those people – I remember many of his words – wise words – but I remember everything about his character, and his demeanor, and his faith.

While I was in seminary, he lost a son. His youngest. A wonderful three-year-old boy. It was a freak accident in the backyard we all shared – nothing anyone could have foreseen. I won't burden you with the details, but you can be sure I have replayed that afternoon and evening many times. It is one of the most traumatic events of my life – I can only imagine how it was for his family.

At the funeral, this professor, my friend, was speaking to several of us – I remember him saying, "I'm afraid we won't talk about my son. That it will just hurt too much, so we just won't talk about him. I can feel it happening already," he said. "And other people will be afraid to tell us their memories and their stories about him, because they will know how much it will hurt us to remember." And so I resolved to do what he was asking of us.

But I didn't. I asked him how he was doing a few times. When he traveled back to a family plot on the old family farm for his son's burial, I asked about it, and was glad to listen, and maybe it did him some good to tell about it. Maybe once I shared a memory I had of his son.

But if you have a friend like this, I hope you will do better than I did. Things like this can start to come between us. When we know it is going to be painful for us to talk about it, painful for us and painful for them – why open it all up again? But then, what will we talk about out? Less and less? And how long before we just don't talk at all?

I was reminded of all this years later, when I heard my professor was receiving an award for his teaching, and so he was giving a lecture that would be broadcast online. And it was a joy just to see an old friend lecturing again. And it was brilliant stuff, as always. But it was a special gift to

me that he had the occasion that day to speak at some length on the verse in First Corinthians 15: “and the last enemy to be destroyed is death.” The last enemy to be destroyed is death. And those who didn’t know him, and didn’t know what he’d been through, I’m sure they got a lot out of it. But for me, it was such a comfort, for two reasons: one, I could see that he had found a way forward. He had made his peace, he had gotten some closure. He had had to bury his little boy, and I’m sure, had to close off some whole part of his heart, but he had survived. That comforted me.

But what made my heart sing was to hear him speak of his clear hope in something *beyond the closure he had found*. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

We have underestimated God if we think God is going to leave us to weep until there are no more tears outside a tomb that is shut and sealed. God has promised. We have hope.

God has a way of opening what we have closed, so that what God has begun in us can be complete. In Jesus, we have seen that hope.

We may call a truce with death – that may be the best we can do. But God is not party to that truce. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

We may have to find our peace – our best wisdom says, “leave ‘good enough’ alone,” and that’s fine. But God is not in the business of ‘good enough.’ “I am making all things new.”

If you are grieving, my dearest hope for you is that you would find closure, and some sense of peace, and a way forward. But not without the hope that comes from knowing Jesus, who says, “Open up, Come Out, Unbind him and set him free.” He will wipe every tear from our eyes. And death will be no more. Amen.

Sermon Listener Feedback Survey

1. What do you think was this sermon’s understanding of the human condition: the truth about human nature, or the predicament we all find ourselves in? (Please feel free to use your own words, or the preacher’s words as you remember them.)

Respondent A: We are mortal and will experience death of ones we love, and will be confronted with our own mortality. The best on earth we can hope for is closure and partial peace when losing a loved one.

B: We often get caught up in our emotion, to realize God’s plan. Death and closure are fragile.

C: We want to ask questions like why or why no. We are not quick to remember the Lord’s promises. Many times we need help arriving at peace.

D: Regarding the human condition: We all have experienced death of a loved one. The sermon encourages us to look beyond finding closure to finding peace and the hope of eternal life through Jesus.

E: Jesus—in true human form—feels our loss, our pain, our tears. Unlike the rest of us, he knows the Father’s plan to eliminate “death” for all believers.

2. Was that description of the human condition something you could relate to? How strongly did it resonate with you? Where does it connect with your own life and experiences?

A: We all lose ones we love to death on earth. I have lost friends and family to death. In terms of hearing about suicides of co-workers or acquaintances – wondering if I missed the signs. Could someone have made an intervention to prevent that suicide?

B: Yes, I relate to how the fact that we are fragile being, but God will not be content until death is no more.

C: Having lost a husband, both parents, and a brother, the grief Mary had resonated with me. I certainly grieved for the loss and took time arriving at peace.

D: This resonated very strongly with me as I reflected on the death of my parents as well as the deaths of children of friends and negative events in the life of my children.

3. *Is there anything you can remember in today's reading(s) from the Bible that connects to this understanding of the human condition?*

A: Death, guilt of family members or perhaps healthcare staff who are wondering if more could have been done. Family wondering if Jesus could have been there – could Lazarus' death have been avoided at that time?

B: God won't stop reopening the wound, because when he finally stops death, he wants us to remember our lost loved ones so that we look forward to God's promise.

C: The story of Mary's grief and her doubt that Jesus' late arrival would make any difference connects to the human condition.

D: Many of us are "Marys," wanting to be practical and come to closure rather than looking forward.

4. *What in this sermon sounded like good news to you? (Feel free to state it in your own words.)*

A: Death is the last enemy and God says it will be conquered. 1 Corinthians 15

B: God won't stop until he fulfills his promise.

C: Jesus (God) will always be there to help us. We need not grieve or worry as we tend to do. The Lord will certainly take care of us!

D: "God insists on opening what we have closed." Our hope in Jesus is beyond just closure.

5. *What did this sermon change for you, or how did it make you feel? What questions does it raise?*

A: Good sermon. Hopeful, need to stay steadfast in God's word.

B: That God will not abandon us, and death will not win.

C: Stronger.

D: This sermon was comforting to me and made me think about my reaction to loved ones' deaths in a different way. Questions?? It challenged me to think how I will respond to grieving friends so I can be more comforting to them.

APPENDIX F

GROUNDED THEORY

"Grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves. Thus researchers construct a theory 'grounded' in their data. Grounded theory begins with inductive data, invokes iterative strategies of going back and forth between data and analysis, uses comparative methods, and keeps [the researcher] interacting and involved with... data and emerging analysis."¹

Charmaz summarizes the approach and benefits to the researcher, in contrast to other methods: "Grounded theory strategies lead you to concentrate on your analysis rather than on arguments about it, to delay the literature review, and to construct an original theory that interprets your data. These strategies contradict traditional requirements for reporting research."²

¹ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 1.

² Ibid., 20.

Grounded theory does not hypothesize the neutrality of the observer in data collection and analysis: “The empirical world does not appear to us in some natural state apart from human experience. Instead we know the empirical world through the language and actions we take toward it. In this sense, no researcher is neutral because language confers form and meaning on observed realities.”³ Yet this does not preclude self-reflection and objectivity. On the one hand, it is true that, as researchers and analysts “we define what we as significant in the data and describe what we think is happening,” but on the other hand, “coding should inspire us to examine hidden assumptions in *our* use of language as well as that of our participants” (emphasis in original).⁴

After gathering qualitative data, grounded theory research proceeds to coding. “Coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data.”⁵ Coding is defined as “categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data.”⁶ In order to allow theory to emerge organically from the data and to remain grounded in the data, grounded theory uses at least two stages of coding.

Once all data is collected, and transcribed as necessary, researchers proceed to a line-by-line process of initial coding. “Initial coding continues the interaction that you shared with your participants while collecting data but brings you into an interactive analytical space.”⁷ Charmaz’s method emphasizes two approaches to initial coding: coding with gerunds, and *in vivo* coding. Gerunds emphasize actions and keep them from turning too quickly into abstract themes in our minds: “we gain a strong sense of action and sequence with gerunds... nouns [would] turn these actions into topics.”⁸ *In vivo* coding allows the researcher to listen closely to the language used by the participants themselves and to be aware of emerging patterns in expression and action by using the participants’ own terms and language to code.⁹ *In vivo* terms may or may not become part of the final analysis, but they keep the researcher close to specific language of the data and may provide a helpful check against allowing the data to be dominated by the categories of the researcher, and thus novel or unexpected emergent themes be lost.

The coding process blends into the beginning of analysis. “Careful coding... helps you to refrain for imputing your motives, fears, or unresolved personal issues to your respondents and to your collected data,” taking seriously the perspectives and words of participants. At the same time, “coding forces you to think about the material in new ways that may differ from your research participants’ interpretations...by studying the data and following leads you find in them, you may make fundamental processes explicit, render hidden assumptions visible, and give participants new insights.”¹⁰

³ Ibid., 114.

⁴ Ibid., 114-115.

⁵ Ibid., 113.

⁶ Ibid., 111.

⁷ Ibid., 109.

⁸ Ibid., 120-121.

⁹ Ibid., 134-135.

¹⁰ Ibid., 133.

Focused coding is the next step, but it “is not entirely a linear process... An ‘Aha! Now I understand!’ experience may prompt you to study your earlier data afresh.”¹¹ This process again emphasizes grounding emerging themes in the data: “focused coding means more than simply selecting and going forward with the codes that most interest you. Rather, it means concentrating on what you initial codes say and the comparisons you make with and between them.”¹²

One step remains between coding and writing, consisting of “extended notes, called memos [which] form the core of your analysis and record how you arrived at it.” In writing memos, “you become progressively more analytic in how you treat [your data and codes] and thus you raise certain codes to tentative conceptual categories.”¹³ After memos are written in detail, writing of the analysis can begin, with confidence that conclusions, while influenced throughout by the perceptions and language of the researcher, are grounded in the words and actions of the participants.

¹¹ Ibid., 141.

¹² Ibid., 140.

¹³ Ibid., 19-20.

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