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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
7/25/2012, in preparation for Pentecost 9B
2 Kings 4:42-44, Ephesians 3:14-21, John 6:1-21
Strengthening the Inner Being

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's First Lesson and Gospel Lesson fit together nicely. Both speak of miracles of multiplication in which a large crowd is fed from meager provisions. In the case of Elisha, in the First Lesson, that prophet was able to feed a company of one hundred men in the brotherhood of prophets with twenty loaves of barley and some fresh grain. There was famine in the land in those days, and so that company of one hundred men might have been lean and hungry. But they ate their fill, and there was some left over. Likewise in our Gospel story, though even more gloriously: Jesus feeds a company of five thousand men with but five barley loaves and two fish. Again, the multitude eats their fill and there is food left over: twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves.

With this wonderful story of the multiplication of the loaves, old, arrogant Satan receives his just answer to the first of his temptations:

³And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.
(Matthew 4:3, KJV)

Back at the start of his ministry, during his wilderness temptations, Jesus had refused to turn stones into bread. Now we see that he did not refuse owing to inability, for Jesus is indeed able to provide bread from nothing. Rather Jesus refused Satan's promise because Jesus had no interest in demonstrating for Satan's sake something he already knew from his heavenly Father: that is, that he was indeed the Son of God. So, Jesus would not produce bread for the sake of proving anything to Satan. But in today's story we see that Jesus can and gladly does produce bread from another motive: compassion for the people. It is late, the people are far from their homes, Jesus sympathizes with their hunger, and so he feeds them. It is a great miracle, this multiplying of the five loaves and two fish to feed a crowd of five thousand.

So, our First Lesson and Gospel Lesson are similar stories, both involving a wonderful increase from small beginnings.

OUR READING FROM EPHESIANS

And I think we can see why the writers of our lectionary chose today's Epistle Reading too. It is because of St. Paul's testimony about the ability of God to do good things that outstrip our ability to even imagine them. Paul's great line goes this way:

²⁰Now unto him that is able to do *exceeding abundantly* above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, ²¹Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.
(Ephesians 3:20-21, KJV)

This testimony to the surpassing ability of our God to do good things is a natural choice and commentary on the miracles of multiplication in the other two Bible readings.

I want to linger this morning with the Ephesians reading. At first, I suspect it will seem that I am lifting up a text that is out of step with our Gospel story. So I do not intend to focus on the "exceeding abundantly" power of God to do wonders, but rather on another part of that reading. However, in the long run, I think that this other part of the Ephesians reading is also relevant to our Gospel Lesson -- deeply relevant.

So, here is the line from our Ephesians Lesson I want to lift up. It is a prayer. Those Ephesians are lucky people because they have an apostle praying for them, and he prays for something stirring, something breathtaking:

¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be *strengthened in your inner being* with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and *that Christ may dwell in your hearts* through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. (Ephesians 3:16-17, RSV)

I bet that many of us could ponder our failures and our weaknesses, sigh, and quietly say to ourselves, "That is exactly what I need. I need a strengthening of my inner being." Sometimes, perhaps only for a fleeting moment of discouragement, we might wonder whether we are ever really going to pull things together. We need more strength in our inner being. But Paul speaks of a particular manner of strengthening. He speaks of Jesus, that he might "dwell in your hearts." This is a great mystery. So, let's speak of these two things: strengthening of our inner being, and Jesus dwelling in our hearts.

First, about our inner being, God bless every one of us who could use some strengthening of our inner being! I am going to run through a list of folks who could use such strengthening, and I include myself among them.

Before I begin the list, let me mention a point of grammar. In my discussion of those who could use strengthening in their inner being, I am going to take advantage of the old meaning of the pronoun “he” to mean “humanity, both male and female.” It does no good to alternate between “he” and “she” because I do not want to suggest that any of these shortcomings are characteristic of one sex rather than the other. No, I bet they are equally distributed. So, I am simply using the word “he” in this discussion to refer to both men and women, boys and girls.

Let’s start with the addicted one. The alcoholic, for example, might wonder whether he is really going to survive this, whether he is really going to triumph over drink. Gone to AA, perhaps even gone to an expensive rehab treatment center, but still wondering whether he is going to make it, or is he going to be destroyed by his addiction.

Next, the adulterer might be burning with guilt over his sin. He is breaking someone’s heart. He deeply regrets that. But even more deeply, he burns with passion. If he loves the one with whom he commits adultery, that love is spoiled by the sin. For true love breaks no holy commandment. He believes that our God does not smile upon the adultery, and if he could somehow go back and live life over again, he would by all means flee from adultery. But he cannot go back. All he can do is try to figure out what to do next, all the while wondering whether he has the inner resources to actually do it.

Or the narcissist might catch a passing glimpse of himself as the self-centered person he is. He might note how his time and money all revolve around himself. But he might also note that he is lonely, that people instinctively step back from him as if they know not to entwine their lives with someone whose heart simply is not generous because it is so focused on himself. And so it is that the narcissist might note his egoism, but wonder whether he will ever really overcome it. He might wonder whether he will ever really pull it together to become the kind of person other people can entrust themselves to.

Or the covetous one might at last survey his apartment, see his closets stuffed with each passing season’s fashions, see the popular magazines cluttering the table tops all calling out to him in their beguiling way, note how borderline his checking account balance is and how little money he actually gives to charity each year... he might notice that he has slipped into a kind of slavery to fashion, long for a more simple life, yet wonder whether he is every really going to have the inner strength to settle for simplicity.

Or the one who eats too much or exercises too little might catch a glance of himself in the mirror and say, “I can hold in my stomach, but I still do not look so good anymore. My knees are hurting, my ankles are hurting. I keep outgrowing my clothes. My cholesterol is high. My doctor keeps scowling at me. I’ve dieted and lost weight before, but it came back. I used to look pretty good, back when I was young, but now I do not look so good, and I wonder whether I am ever going to get back in shape.”

Or the talented one might, in a moment of self-examination, acknowledge that he has been squandering his talent. He had advantages of education, advantages of

opportunity, especially here in our magnificent town. But other people had such advantages too. The difference is that in addition to those advantages, he also had God-given talents for science or music or art or writing or theatre -- talents that other folks would die for -- but has bit by bit stopped nurturing those talents. Maybe he got old, maybe he got lazy, but he looks at himself and says, "I should be doing better, but I wonder whether I can. There is nothing holding me back. I am free to do some wonderful work, yet I wonder whether I have the inner fortitude any more to do it."

Or the procrastinator might one day say, "This is getting ridiculous! Why do I always end up in a panic? And not only me, but everyone else who is depending on me? Why do I keep delaying? I know that the "early bird gets the worm," yet I am *never* early. What difference would five minutes make? Why don't I just make sure to arrive five minutes early instead of five minutes late? Why do I keep saying, "Tomorrow I will do this. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. Always tomorrow"?"

"Strengthening the inner being." St. Paul knew that the ancient Ephesians needed such strengthening. We modern-folk might need it too.

JESUS DWELLING IN US

Next, note that St. Paul's prayer for the strengthening of the inner being speaks of a particular form of strength: Paul prays that Jesus would dwell in the heart. This makes sense to me: If Jesus dwells in my heart, not just my head, but also in my heart, in the very center of my identity and the source of my deeds, then I will be more like him. And if I am more like him, then I will be a more disciplined, focused, and a stronger person indeed, for that is the way he is.

So, this makes sense to me. But I think it also invites a discussion of the distinction between "technique" vs. "goal." The goal for a Christian should be that Christ will dwell in our hearts. But I believe that there are a variety of techniques toward that goal, including some that seem entirely secular.

The alcoholic Christian, for example, could very well take advantage of AA. In my opinion, AA is one of a fairly few organizations that can actually save a human life. Hospitals can save lives. So can police, sometimes at the cost of their own lives. But AA is another of those good organizations. There is great power in the companionship of those who have been there -- there where you are. There is great strength in the help of those who are day-by-day fighting the same fight that you are fighting. If you are a Christian, then you can fill in the terrible blank at the heart of AA -- that worship of some deity called "The Higher Power." You can interpret that by way of the Triune God. But that the twelve-steps of AA are good and help to save lives, that is well-established. So, let AA be an important *technique* for a Christian. But besides that, strive that Jesus will dwell in your heart. It is possible to be a recovering alcoholic, successfully living one day at a time, without being conformed to Christ. But St. Paul wants something else too: that there should be recovering alcoholics who are becoming more Christlike the older they get.

And the adulterer: pity the adulterer and all those harmed by that sin! The adulterer might have tried to repent before, but failed. He went back to the one he knows he should be leaving alone. Then try again! Try once more to leave the adultery behind. Perhaps for the first time, or perhaps for the seventieth time, go to Private Confession about the matter. Bring another brother or sister-in-the-Lord into the struggle. But above all, strive to return to Christ, that he might dwell in your heart. Do not forget the One who says to each of us, "Go, and sin no more":

¹⁰Jesus looked up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again." (John 8:10, RSV)

Again, the narcissist. That one could indeed benefit from therapy -- even secular therapy. But the therapist might not make it his aim to teach the narcissist to become more like Jesus, who was probably the least narcissistic person this world has ever known. The analyst might not make that his aim for the therapy, but the narcissist is free to make it *his* aim. For him, therapy might well be a massive deed of repentance in which the narcissist forsakes focus on self and learns to focus more on others, following the pattern of Jesus.

And the covetous one can well use secular techniques to get his buying under control. He can actually balance his checkbook and ponder the details of how he has been spending money. He can forsake credit cards and pay instead with check or debit card. He can build up a savings account. He can train herself to admire an uncluttered apartment. He can get help from a financial counselor. But all the while as he does these good things he can also think of Jesus and strive to becoming more like the one who, though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor:

⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9, RSV)

And the one who overeats can well get help from the South Beach diet or Weight Watchers. And the one who gets too little exercise can start walking or even work with a personal trainer. But as you do these things remember a great line by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann:

Fasting is a fight *for* the body, not against it.

In particular, fasting is a fight for the body that we might be able to present it as a living sacrifice to the Lord. We need good health that we can serve our neighbors in love. We need more modest diets that we will have money to give to the poor

that they not go hungry. It is good to be fit. But it is even better to be fit for the sake of a Christ-like life.

And the talented one who is squandering his gifts: Do whatever you can to put those talents back into action. For example, take stock of the reality that compared to other talented persons, you still have much work to do. I recently read a little book about Beethoven, for example. One of its themes is that Beethoven never forsook his gifts. He had extraordinary music strength even as a young man, but grew in power the older he became. Well, if Beethoven can continue to work and to grow even into old age, so can other talented people afford to go on working and developing. There is still much good work to be done, even if we have been able to coast on the gifts we have. But besides this, besides trying to get back on track in the nurturing of your gifts, remember Christ. Remember to develop your gifts as a kind of high priestly work by which you love your neighbors in the name of Jesus by the employment of your talents.

Let the procrastinator put off his delay. Behavioral therapists can perhaps help with this. But in addition to putting off procrastination, put on Christ. Let the freedom created by doing a job well and on time be a freedom you use in serving Jesus.

And finally, for each of us, let us do what St. Paul illustrates in this passage: he prays that through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, Christ will dwell in our hearts. Let us not forget to pray such a prayer for ourselves. Let us fill our hearts and our imaginations with the stories of Jesus and pray that he dwell with us.

CREATED FOR THIS, FOR GOOD DEEDS

And this brings me back to our Gospel Lesson. I had suggested that this matter of strengthening the inner being through the indwelling of Jesus is relevant to the story of the multiplication of the loaves. I continue to think so, but it is a point that will be even easier to see next Sunday. There we learn that Jesus does not want folks to seek him simply so that they can have bread for their stomachs. Bread for hungry stomachs is indeed a good thing, and Jesus means to feed a hungry world someday. But meanwhile, Jesus wants something else too. He wants us to understand that he himself is the Bread of Life. And with this Bread of Life, we have a chance to get back on track. For we were not made for weaknesses of spirit, nor for sin or vice, but rather for good deeds in this world:

¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10, RSV)

Seek Jesus, then, not simply for the sake of the body, but also for the sake of the soul, that we will fashion ourselves into more useful ministers to the world and more compelling images of Jesus Christ in the world, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.