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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
8/21/2016, The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost,
Lectionary 21
Isaiah 58:9b-14, Luke 13:10-17
The Pointing of the Finger

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

This morning's sermon is about the pointing of the finger. My text is from our First Lesson, Isaiah 58. It reads this way:

^{9b}If you take away from the midst of you the yoke,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
¹⁰if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the
afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the
noonday.

I have done this wicked thing: I have pointed the finger. I am sorry and hope to do better going forward. Especially I seem provoked to point the finger when I am driving the car. I love to drive, but I am mindful of the momentum and power of cars. And when it is dusk and I see a dark-colored car speeding along in the left lane without its headlights on, I tend to point to that car, as if to say, "Behold, a living idiot!" I imagine the driver thinking to himself, "My eyesight is good. I can still see." But he does not understand that the importance of headlights is not just that he can *see*, but also that he can *be seen* – that the poor drivers in the lane next to him will have some hope of seeing the fellow before they move over into his lane. So, when evening approaches and I see a dark gray-colored car zooming along in the left lane without its headlights on, I find myself pointing to that car, as if inviting God's whole universe to behold the reckless driver.

Now for a distinction Martin Luther holds up in his discussion of the Eighth Commandment – the commandment against false witness. It is one thing for me, a private person on the road, to point the finger of condemnation toward another driver. But it is a very different thing for a State Trooper in his police car to nudge his partner and point to the speeding car without its headlights on. The difference is a matter of official position. The State Trooper has an official reason for pointing out a bad driver. But I have no such official reason, and so probably it would be best for me to simply say a quick prayer for safety and peace for all drivers, and go on in life.

That's what Luther says about the Eighth Commandment. He says that even if gossip is *true*, we should let our tongue be a tomb, so that the gossip dies with us. In that way, we will be showing love for our neighbor by helping our neighbor to preserve a good name and to hold up his head with some dignity in this world. But

all of that is true only if we are private persons. If, however, we have an official reason to speak, then we should go ahead and speak the truth. If we are witnesses to a crime, for example, we should bear true witness, even if it harms the reputation of the guilty one.

So, this has been a beginning discussion of pointing the finger. Now, let's back up and enlarge the perspective.

Israel's misery begins with such everyday deeds as pointing the finger of contempt toward one another. Isaiah speaks of a good number of these sins: the yoke whereby the poor are ground down into exhaustion, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, the failures of compassion leaving the hungry and the afflicted neglected along the side of the road. Modern people might suppose that relations among nations – the rising up of some and the fall of others – have little to do with the everyday deeds of courtesy and compassion among the people. But that is not how Isaiah sees it. Nor is that how the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth, sees it!

The great accomplishment of Israel's prophets following the devastation of Jerusalem in 587 BC was to keep hope alive among the people – including the Israelites whisked off into Babylonian captivity. The prophet Isaiah was perhaps foremost of all at doing this. His powers of faith and eloquence kept Israel from following the normal path of despair and eventual accommodation to the conquering powers. I mean, in the normal way of thinking, Babylon's terrible defeat of Israel meant that Baal was stronger than the LORD, and so it was time to face up to reality and start serving Baal. But Isaiah saved the people from this. He kept hope alive in the LORD and in the eventual coming of God's kingdom. Using tender images, he preached to the conquered people that the LORD had not forgotten them – that he *could not* forget them:

¹⁵Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. ¹⁶See, I have inscribed you *on the palms of my hands...* (Isaiah 49:15-16, NRSV)

That last image is probably more true than even Isaiah could know: You are indeed inscribed on the palms of the LORD's hands – right there in the mark of the nails of Calvary's cross!

What Isaiah does is to teach his people that there is a profound distinction between "punishment" and "destruction." The LORD has punished Israel, yes. The LORD punished Israel precisely because of the pointing of the finger and the heavy yoke on the poor and the neglect of the hungry and the afflicted. So, yes, the LORD *punished* Israel. But the LORD did not *destroy* Israel. "For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29, RSV).

Punishment is compatible with love. Many parents know that, I believe. Punishment can yearn for a better world and for a better people. Punishment often means precisely that the stronger one has not given up on the weaker one. But

destruction is different. Destruction means the end of the line, the end of hope, the end of the chance for repentance and amendment of life. So, yes, the LORD has punished Israel. In fact, he raised up Babylon to do so. But the LORD has not destroyed Israel. In this fashion, Isaiah taught the people to hope and to *wait* upon the LORD:

But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31, KJV)

The pointing of the finger cannot stand! The heavy yoke, the speaking of wickedness, the neglect of the hungry and the afflicted cannot stand – not in God’s world! Isaiah preaches this to the people, lest they fall back into sin and its punishment all over again.

In the fullness of time, the finger of condemnation came to be pointed toward the One who least deserved it. I mean, our Saviour Jesus. Judas did this thing. He pointed to Jesus – singled him out:

⁴⁸Now he that betrayed him gave them a sign, saying, Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he: hold him fast. ⁴⁹And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and kissed him. (Matthew 26:48-49, KJV)

As he was being readied for crucifixion, again the cruel fingers pointed toward Jesus again and handled him roughly:

²⁹And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand: and they bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews! ³⁰And they spit upon him, and took the reed, and smote him on the head. (Matthew 27:29-30, KJV)

On the Cross, the rulers of the people singled Jesus out, as if saying to God’s whole universe, “Behold, a living idiot!”:

And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God. (Luke 23:35, KJV)

Yet, Jesus is the One who does the reverse of such cruel pointing. Jesus is the One who takes the poor woman in this morning’s Gospel story and heals her. He takes this lady bent over by eighteen years of infirmity – this lady visibly

separated from her neighbors by her bent back – Jesus takes this lady and restores her to normality. She is no longer distinguished by her infirmity. Now she can stand upright. He made her straight, and she praised God!

Sorrows and guilt and bad memories can bend many a back. Things we have done, things we have left undone, might, in our minds, distinguish us from the rest of humanity. They look more innocent to us than we know ourselves to be. And maybe this is right. Maybe the rest of the world *is* more innocent that we are. Indeed, maybe we are the lowest of the low.

But if so, I am glad to end with one more quote from that great book of Isaiah. It is meant for us who feel distinguished, separated, and lower than the rest of our human race. The great text goes this way:

Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD:
though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. (Isaiah
1:18, KJV)

Our sins shall be as “white as snow,” saith the LORD. Does he indeed say so? Yes, he does. “Father, forgive,” he says to you, to me. And to him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.