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Homiletics: Studies on the Swedish Gospels

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HOMILETICS

Studies on the Swedish Gospels

REMINISCERE, THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

LUKE 7:36-50

The Text and Its Central Thought.—Here is a rich text: Lenski refers to one who preached twenty sermons on it. Here is a difficult text: some (the Roman Church, for instance) misinterpret it in the direction of work-righteousness, and, indeed, the words seem to warrant that. Here is an important text: its main theme centers about that most Christian concept, LOVE.

The major chord of the text is the harmony between love and forgiveness. A lack of appreciation of the forgiveness of sins is seen in the Pharisee to produce a loveless person (critical of others; both the woman of the street and Jesus come in for criticism, v. 39), one lacking even in common courtesy, vv. 43-46. In contrast, the penitent and pardoned woman seeks ways to express her love, even risking criticism in her display of devotion. There is no question about Jesus' reaction: the loveless one is rebuked, while the penitent hears words of absolution (v. 48) and peace (v. 50). Another way of saying the same thing is that the Pharisee lacked faith in the Son of God, who was his Guest; while the woman's faith in Him saved her (v. 50). Her love proved the genuineness of her faith; so we must understand v. 47 in the light of v. 50. This is also the burden of the parable about the two debtors, a message that is not totally lost upon the Pharisee, who is made to state the point with his own lips, v. 43. Quite clearly it is not so much a question of more sin or less sin—indeed who will judge between the offensive sins which have blotted the characters of these two in this text?—but it is a question of the attitude toward sin, and subsequently toward Him who can forgive sin (vv. 48 f.). The central thought of the text may be stated in the words of Jesus, rightly understood: "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for (not the reason why, but the proof for the acceptance of forgiveness) she loved much."

The context is relatively unimportant for this text, though the preceding reference to Jesus' willingness to associate with sinners may

be drawn in as further evidence of His saving love, that of which the text is one graphic example. It is better not to connect this anointing with that recorded in Matthew 26, Mark 14, or John 12; also there is no warrant for identifying the woman with Mary Magdalene.

The Day and Its Theme.—A note of triumph runs through the propers for Reminiscere. The Introit asks that our enemies not be permitted to triumph and expresses confident trust in God. The Collect acknowledges personal helplessness but looks to God for defense in all dangers to body or soul. The Epistle (1 Thess. 4:1-7) describes the new life which triumphs over the flesh, while the Gospel (Matt. 15:21-28) portrays the Syrophenician woman who rises so gloriously over the seeming disinterest and reluctance on the part of the Savior that He commends her: "O woman, great is thy faith!" Fittingly the Swedish Lectionary suggests the theme "Victorious Faith." Also in perfect harmony, *Parish Activities* lists the theme "Winning Victories for Christ over Self." Thus our text ties all together with its beautiful story of victory, and its lesson on victory over lovelessness, the basic sin of self.

The Goal and Purpose of the Sermon.—To create an awareness of this basic lack in our nature: the absence of love; an awareness of its root cause: a lack of appreciation of the forgiveness in Christ—this, in order to condition the hearer for a deeper realization of His need for the Savior's forgiveness, an increased dependence on the forgiving and loving Savior—and thus finally to prepare the way for a life of greater love.

Sin and Its Fruits to be Diagnosed and Remedied.—There are two sins here, similarly deadly in their effects. On the one hand here is pride of self, self-righteousness, that great roadblock preventing the Gospel from making entry into the human heart. On the other hand, here is deep awareness of guilt which in its reluctance to face God may descend into the "slough of despond." Both dangers involve the very health of character, the wholeness of life, eternal destiny. Both can utterly defeat.

Opportunities for Explicit Gospel. — The following expressions of the text are beautifully opportune for explicit Gospel proclamation: "If He were a prophet, (He) would have known." "A certain creditor . . . forgave them both." "Thy sins are forgiven." "Who is this that forgiveth sins also?" "Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace." Yes, the two characters of the incident serve as a kind of backdrop to set forth the Saviors love in bold relief — love that shows itself whether

it be in the application of Law or of Gospel. Yes, He is the one who displayed the "greater love" of actually laying down His life for people like this, people like us. Thus He earned the right to "forgive sins also"; is the divine Creditor who "frankly forgave them both." If only all would ask, "Who is This?" The end result would have to be, under the Spirit of God: "We love Him, because He first loved us" — 1 John 4:19 — yes, "loved much" (v. 47).

Illustrations. — A graphic telling of the parable of Jesus — made to order by the Lord Himself to illustrate His message. The very action in the text is illustrative and graphic and concrete. Daily life is replete with exhibits similar to both the proud Pharisee and the penitent woman. It is said of Charles Bronté that, when dying, he was too proud to call a doctor, too proud even to lie down, and so he died standing up; nor does pride save a man from eternal death.

Outline. — "If we can love, this is the touchstone. This is the key to the entire therapeutic program of the modern psychiatric hospital. It dominates the behavior of its staff from director to gardener. To our patient who cannot love, we must say by our actions that we love him — love is the medicine for the sickness of the world" — Dr. Karl Menninger, of the famous clinic in Kansas, quoted in *Lutheran Education*, June, 1954, page 476. The Bible has long said something similar of man's entire self.

Can We Love?

I. Love is the touchstone.

- A. The lovelessness in life, how common. The Pharisee: discourteous, critical, selfish, proud.
- B. The cause: men are not conscious of their need for pardoning love.
- C. Jesus applies the touchstone: "Which loved most?"
- D. Lack of love points up lack of faith. Love is the touchstone of faith. Lack of love, therefore, defeats, damns!

II. Love is the key.

- A. There is a Love that can draw us. The woman: hesitant, yet hopeful, penitent, and pardoned — it draws her.
- B. Jesus is willing to be "numbered with the transgressors" — here and on the cross.
- C. Now "we love because He first loved us," indeed, "love much."

Here is the key to character problems, the problem of self, because it cures the basic problem: sin and guilt! Apply this "medicine for

the sickness of the world," LOVE, first Christ's love, then yours! Go in peace! Go in love!

OR:

Victorious Faith

I. Overcomes pride in self.

Comes to humble repentance by applying the "touchstone of love."

II. Conquers despair over sin.

Rises to confident faith on the basis of Christ's medicine of love.

Thus victorious faith grows out of Christ's love. It avoids the two extremes of defeated human personality: pride, despair. Love leads to victory over self.

Honolulu, Hawaii

WINFRED A. SCHROEDER

OCULI, THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

LUKE 4:31-37

The Text and Its Central Thought: Though the Jews of Nazareth sought to kill Jesus because of the truth He preached to them (vv. 16-30), Jesus did not stop preaching. He had an urgent message to proclaim, a message which all men needed to hear; therefore, when He came to Capernaum, He again taught the people, v. 31. (Read Mark 1:21-28.) What Jesus taught we are not told; however, we are told that the people were impressed. "The people were struck as by a blow" by the earnestness, the freshness, and the power of His preaching. However, not only the "how" of His preaching but also, and especially, the "what" of His preaching held His hearers spell-bound. There was power in His preaching. His doctrine was peace, comfort, light, and life to those who heard Him. His preaching was practical and heart-searching, v. 32.

Suddenly the discourse of Jesus was interrupted by the scream of a man "which had a spirit of an unclean devil," v. 33. The man screeched at the top of his voice, "Ha! here you are! I know, You are the Holy One of God. You are come to destroy us. Get out and let us alone!" V. 34. Instantly Jesus silenced him, "muzzled" him. More than that, Jesus commanded the devil to come out of the man. As the devil obeyed, he revealed his true nature by hurling the man down with such "force and fury as if he would have dashed him to pieces." Jesus, however, permitted no harm to come to the man. Luke the physician notes the fact that the man was unhurt, v. 35.

Again the people were amazed at the authority and the power of the words which passed over the lips of Jesus, v. 36. Soon people everywhere in the neighboring region heard about this miracle, v. 37. This text emphasizes the authority and the power of our Savior's Word. No man can remain indifferent. Some, when they hear the words of Jesus, are filled with wrath, others are filled with joyful amazement. At the sound of Jesus' word the devil cringes in terror.

The Day and Its Theme: Oculi, the third Sunday in Lent, has "The Authority of Jesus" for its theme. The Epistle, Eph. 5:1-9, is an exhortation unto holy living. The Gospel, Luke 11:14-28, emphasizes Christ's dominion over Satan and his kingdom. The Introit expresses confidence that the Lord will deliver those who place their trust in Him. The Gradual contains a prayer for God's mercy. The Collect petitions God to defend His servants against their enemies. The accent of *Parish Activities* for the month, "Winning Victories for Christ over Self," can well be utilized. It is only through the power of Christ's Word that we can win victories over self for Christ.

The Goal and Purpose of the Sermon: To impress the hearer that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, though despised and rejected by the multitudes of our day, is in truth the power of God unto salvation. Since this is true, Christians are to unleash every effort for the spread of the Gospel.

Sin and Its Fruits to Be Diagnosed and Remedied: It is through His Word that Jesus reveals Himself as our Savior. Therefore the rejection of His Word is a rejection of Jesus. The rejection of Jesus through the rejection of His Word is a sin against which Christians must constantly be on their guard.

Opportunities for Explicit Gospel: In Luke 4:16-21 we are told what Jesus preached unto the people in the synagog at Nazareth. He preached Himself as the promised Messiah. We are not told what Jesus preached at Capernaum. However, of this we can be confident—He once more preached Himself as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy; He once more preached Himself as the Savior of sinners. In the development of the sermon ample opportunity presents itself to emphasize the Gospel truth that Jesus is our Savior.

Illustrations: The text is filled with dramatic pictures: Jewish worship service on the Sabbath, Jesus holding the people spellbound with His teaching in the synagog, the demoniac interrupting the service with a diabolic screech, the confusion on the part of the people, the calm rebuke and command of Jesus, the amazement of the people.

Outline

The Word of Jesus Is Power

- I. Jesus demonstrates the power of His Word.
 - A. Nineteen centuries ago, by preaching personally.
 1. He preached as One having authority:
 - a. He knew what He was talking about.
 - b. He meant what He said.
 2. His doctrine was amazing:
 - a. The doctrine of man's guilt.
 - b. The doctrine of God's grace.
 - B. Today, by preaching through His faithful ministers.
 1. The Word they preach (Scripture) speaks with authority about sin and grace, death and life.
 - a. Scripture gives a correct diagnosis of man's greatest problems.
 - b. Scripture offers the correct remedy for all of man's problems.
 2. The doctrines they preach (Scripture) fill the hearts of those who hear with amazement.
- II. Jesus proves the power of His Word.
 - A. Nineteen centuries ago, by healing the demoniac through the power of His Word.
 - B. Today, by healing unbelievers of their unbelief through the power of His Word.

San Antonio, Tex.

R. WIEDERAENDERS

LAETARE, THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

JOHN 6:24-36

The Text and Its Central Thought.— Jesus had just performed the miracle of feeding the five thousand. The effect of this miracle upon the people was that they wanted to make Him a king—a bread king. Outwardly our Lord was at the height of His popularity, but it did not rest on a recognition of His true mission: as the Savior of souls, who had come to seek and to save that which was lost. To avoid a demonstration, our Lord left the disciples with the boat and departed from the press of people into the mountain to spend the night in

meditation and prayer. The next day, after considerable searching, the people found Him on the other side of the lake, in Capernaum, and greeted Him with the question, v. 25. Jesus saw the wrong motive lurking in their hearts and answered, vv. 26 and 27. Apparently some of them were impressed with His answer and asked, v. 28. Ruling out any personal effort toward salvation on their part, Jesus said, "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent," v. 29. Jesus alone can still the longing of our souls and bring us into the peaceful presence of our heavenly Father. But the people hedged. They wanted a dramatic proof and sign of His divinity. The miraculous feeding of the five thousand had not been enough, even as some wavering souls today announce that they would believe if God would strike them with a "bolt from the blue." Referring to the manna in the wilderness, they tried to magnify the miracle of Moses, their hero, and undervalue the miracle of Christ. "Christ fed His thousands, but Moses his hundreds of thousands. Christ fed them once, but Moses fed them forty years." But our Lord rectified their mistake and again urged upon them the true Bread from heaven, v. 35. While Christ stilled the physical hunger of the multitudes with earthly bread and while the hunger of the Israelites in the wilderness was satisfied with manna, there is a spiritual hunger in the hearts of men much greater than this. It is the hunger for inner peace, for fears allayed, for sins forgiven, for guilt silenced. Christ alone can and does satisfy this hunger. He has redeemed us, paid the penalty of our sins, reconciled us to God, and by faith made us His very own. Romans 5:1, 2. When the burden of guilt oppresses us and we pour out our hearts at His throne of mercy, He stills our fear with the promise: "Be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee." When with bowed head we seek comfort and strength at His table, He tells us, "This is My body, given for you, and this is My blood, shed for the remission of your sins." We leave with His peace in our hearts and with this prayer of thanks on our lips,

O living Bread from heaven,
 How richly hast Thou fed Thy guest!
 The gifts Thou now hast given
 Have filled my heart with joy and rest.

Or in times of heartache and sorrow, discouragement and grief, when only divine comfort can help, He shows us that in His will is our peace and assures us, "Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid." Yes, Christ satisfies the heart hunger of men. Therefore, a central thought of this text is: "Jesus, the Living Bread from heaven, who died for us and rose again, stills the hunger of men."

The Day and Its Theme.—The Gospel for this day tells of Christ feeding the five thousand. Thus the transition to our text, where Jesus calls Himself the Bread of Life, is a natural. The Epistle speaks of our spiritual sonship and our freedom from sin and death which we have in Christ. The Introit, using some of the wording of the Epistle, calls upon us to rejoice. The Gradual likewise exalts the spiritual blessings of the house of God and the peace which is ours in the kingdom of Christ. The Swedish Lectionary suggests the theme "Bread for the Hungry." All fit well with the thought that as a mother stills the hunger of her child, much more so Christ stills our heart hunger by being the Bread of Life of whom we partake by faith. This fills us with lasting peace, joy, thanksgiving. And this is the means whereby the theme of *Parish Activities* becomes a reality in our lives: "Winning victories over self." When Christ dwells in our hearts by faith, when we feed on the Word, and when we are led by the Spirit, then we have the power to conquer anger, hatred, pride, and growing in spiritual maturity, we bring forth more of the fruits of the Spirit.

The Goal and Purpose of the Sermon.—To draw the hearer closer to Christ as the all-sufficient Bread of Life so that the Savior may abide in him with the merits of His redemption and cause him to bring forth the fruits of faith.

Sin and Its Fruits to be Diagnosed and Remedied.—The false emphasis on material things in America today; the failure to place first things first, especially during the Lenten season, which calls for increasing emphasis on worship, sacrificial giving for Christ's cause, special meditation and prayer; hedonism, "the doctrine that pleasure is the chief good of life"; easy Christianity, reciting the forms of faith, but living after the flesh rather than walking in the spirit. These things cannot satisfy the soul. They belong to the bread which perisheth.

Opportunities for Explicit Gospel.—But Jesus can and does satisfy! Being in Christ or without Christ is not simply "six of one and half a dozen of the other." To have Christ makes all the difference in the world. His pardon is our peace; His blood our cleansing; His cross our comfort; His Word our strength; His presence our joy; His heaven our eternal home. And by His own promise, these qualities, planted in our hearts and nourished by Him, are of lasting quality. "Shall never hunger . . . shall never thirst."

Illustrations.—Variety of pictures suggested by our text: comparison between physical hunger among the starving today and spiritual hunger (60 per cent of world's population on a starvation diet, but

a greater percentage are in the throes of spiritual starvation); chasing after the "bread which perishes" is typical of America today while Jesus, who could still their longing, is ignored. Hence the spiritual vacuum in so many lives, the heart hunger of so many people as indicated by the fact that last year books with a religious flavor outsold others three to one.

Outline:

Jesus Offers Us the Bread of Life

- I. Without Christ, men hunger and starve.
 - A. The Jews who came seeking Christ.
 - B. The heart hunger in America today.
- II. Jesus is the Bread of Life.
 - A. He offers Himself richly and freely in the Gospel.
 - B. He truly satisfies (v. 35).
 - C. He is for all. Not an exclusive Christ (vv. 33 and 35).
- III. Men may reject Him (v. 36).
 - A. He works by grace and love only.
 - B. To reject Him, a power which we have, means death.

Topeka, Kans.

A. C. BURROUGHS

JUDICA, THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

JOHN 8:31-45

The Text and Its Central Thought.—Words are powerful, above all, "The Word." Note the repeated emphasis on "word" and "truth," vv. 31, 32, 37, 40, 43, 45, and on Jesus Himself as the Source and Center of revelation, v. 31 ("My Word"), also vv. 38 a, 42 b, 43. When that Word does its work through the witness of Christ in the church, it does not tolerate indifference. It either breaks the heart in repentance or hardens it. In the text the effect is of hardening, "Increasing Hatred" (Swedish Lectionary theme for the day) of unjust men against God's truth and against Him who proclaims it. The conversation, continued in the Gospel (John 8:46-59), brings the Word into uncompromising conflict against every device of men to distort and to deny it. Men may argue it is irrelevant to them (v. 33), they don't need it (v. 41); they may call the Speaker names (v. 48), accuse Him of boasting (v. 53), mock Him and distort His intent (v. 57), throw stones (v. 59), or even kill (v. 40). Yet the very hatred is a testimony to the cutting power and truth of that two-edged sword.

The "light" and "truth" of God will always prove victorious over the "deceitful and unjust man" (Introit. See also Gradual).

Here, as always, the goal of Jesus through the words He speaks is not to destroy men, but to rescue them from their own self-deception. The first task of the Word (Law) is to shatter illusions. Slums must be leveled to the ground before skyscrapers can be built in their place. It is tragic, then, to see how desperately sinful man seeks to defend and preserve the rotten slum of his soul against the cleansing bulldozer of truth and honesty.

One illusion the Word must shatter is pride, whether of tradition, of ancestry, or of personal worth, vv. 39, 41. Sonship is not determined by physical descent or religious tradition, but by inner character and imagery. By this standard the Jews possess the image neither of Abraham nor of God. Then whose image are they? The devil's! They do his lusts, love and defend his lies, and become accomplices in his murder, vv. 43-45. The same Word condemns us. Will we defend our own proud illusions? Or yield in honesty of repentance to the shattering impact of God's truth?

The second delusion is that of freedom, v. 33, the idea that freedom is secured in rebellion and preserved by disobedience. Yet the sinner no longer possesses unprejudiced opportunity to choose between good and evil, for his sinful nature excludes good, and enables him to choose evil only. If the dice are so loaded against good, he certainly is not free. Furthermore, even his nominal "goodness" is not of free desire, but a product of external pressures and restraints. Such "goodness," dragged out of the reluctant sinner by the forces of God's laws and social governance, is not the free, loving obedience of a son, but of a slave. God takes no pleasure in it; God may tolerate it for a time, but the slave will finally be cast out in judgment, because he does not really belong, v. 35. He who loves that which God hates and hates that which God loves, is trapped by sin and by his own conceit into a life of deception, moral tension, hypocrisy, and slavery. This is the slum the Word must destroy.

Once the Word has shattered, it can build. Thus Jesus offers true sonship, restoration of the honest image of God. In His sacrifice He releases the sinner from the curse and pressure of his own guilt and gives him a new freedom, the opportunity of wholesome honesty and of willing obedience.

The Goal and Purpose of the Sermon.—To create in the hearer an active desire to let the Word expose the hidden deceits, lies, and excuses which still so easily control his thinking, that he may repent

and be cleansed of them and in humble honesty follow the leading of Christ's "light" and "truth." This is the fundamental first step toward the March goal of *Parish Activities*, "Winning Victories for Christ over Self."

Opportunities for Explicit Gospel.—It is always easier to preach Law than Gospel. Since there is so much opportunity here to expose the inner workings of sin, the preacher must take care lest he crowd the Gospel into a small closing paragraph. This would destroy the power of the sermon to produce any change. The reason the sinner so desperately defends his illusions is that he dare not confess them. On the one hand, his own pride will not allow it; on the other, his fear of God's holiness causes him to hate the truth and to flee from it. The Law can begin to puncture the pride. But only the Gospel of forgiveness can give the sinner courage to face the reality of his guilt, and even impassion him to search out his own sin. The text, in exposing guilt, does so only to prepare the way "to purge our conscience from dead works to serve the living God" in the High Priest who "by His own blood . . . obtained eternal redemption for us," Epistle, Hebr. 9:11-15. All this is comprehended in vv. 32, 36.

Illustrations.—The apparent weakness of words ("Sticks and stones . . ."; "Let's not talk; let's act!"), yet their great power, as the transmission of ideas, can readily be demonstrated, perhaps in the introduction. God's Word is the greatest of weapons, to cut down and to build up. Other suggestions for illustrations are embodied above.

Outline.

Face the Truth

- I. Let the Word of God shatter your illusions.
 - A. The illusion that you are free.
 - B. The illusion that you are a son of God.
- II. Let the Word of God rebuild your life.
 - A. In Christ you dare to be honest, to search out and to confess your guilt.
 - B. In Christ you find the true sonship of free and willing obedience.

New Orleans, La.

PAUL G. BRETSCHER