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Homiletics

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HOMILETICS

SEPTUAGESIMA

HOW IS YOUR LISTENING?

LUKE 10:38-42

Introduction

Once again, we are stepping onto that bridge which helps us to cross over from the banks of Epiphany to the shores of Lent. It is a bridge which is three Sundays long. It is a bridge which is marked by its signs to remind us that we are approximately 70, then 60, then 50 days away from Easter. In each of these three Sundays we shall be posing to ourselves a question.

The question of this morning's text ought to be quite obvious. The Mary-Martha story puts us face to face with God's Word and it asks us,

How Is Your Listening?

I. *Are You Really Listening to Your Savior?*

A. *By sitting at His feet?* (v. 39). When Jesus walked into Mary's house, she knew He would have something important to say. She knew that His message would be vital to her welfare. And so she sat. Thus she distinguished herself from her sister Martha. "Martha went into the kitchen. She stood. Mary made another choice. She sat. Before we can serve our Lord, we must be served by our Lord. Before we speak for Him, we must listen to Him. If we are to be alive and live, He must live in us" (M. L. Koehnke, *Editorially Yours*). In this age of speed, we like to get to places with as few detours as possible. God would tell us that if we want to get anywhere as Christians, if we want to grow stronger in our convictions, the first thing we need to do is sit at the feet of Jesus and hear what He has to say. Frequently, people are prone to complain about having to sit through church, especially if that duty comes too often or is too long. Don't complain. Be thankful.

For only as you sit, and as God does the acting through His Word, will the Holy Spirit do great things in you.

B. *By really concentrating on His Word?* (v. 39). Mary drank in the message. It was refreshing water. And thus she followed the example of her Old Testament ancestors (1 Cor. 10:4; 1 Sam. 3:3-10). She knew that she had the call to listen (Matt. 11:15; Ps. 78:1; Is. 55:3). Thus she set an example that has been repeated. (Acts 17:11)

II. *Or, Are You Listening to Your Distractions?*

A. *The distraction of other things?* (v. 40a). Martha's distractions were getting the better of her. She was troubled about the needless to the neglect of the needful. It is easy to be more concerned about a garden full of weeds than about a heart that needs cultivating; more worried that the dinner is tasty than that God's Word be digested with real appetite; more concerned about rest for the body than rest for the soul.

B. *The distraction of other people?* (v. 40b). The words of Jesus were being drowned out by Martha's increasing frustration with her sister. Martha found herself looking so critically at what she thought was wrong with Mary that she had no room left in her mind to see what might have been wrong with herself. We too can be so distracted in applying the Word to others that we fail to apply it where it really belongs—to ourselves.

C. *The distraction of the human heart.* "Anxious and troubled" (v. 41) are but two adjectives of many that describe men's hearts today. But the most condemning description is to be seen in man's unwillingness to listen to God. That a creature who was made to live on every word that comes from the mouth of God should be so arrogant or so

disdainful as to ignore what the most high God has to say is terrible indication of the distance he has wandered from his first perfection.

When we don't want to listen to God is it indeed because we are tired — or because we don't want to be told? The anti-God attitude of our old Adam still shows itself in our lack of love for hearing His Word.

III. *Christ Alone Can Make Us Better Listeners.*

A. *By giving us God's Word as the one thing needful* (v.42a). You can get along with weeds in your lawn. You can manage with not always having the tastiest meals. But you cannot get along without God's Word. You may not like to eat the bread of rebuke. However, God's Word is beginning to do the one thing needful if in hearing it you are driven to pray the Collect, "we, who are justly punished for our offenses."

B. *By being for us God's Word, and giving Himself as the good part* (v.42b). That Savior who visited in Bethany at the home of Mary and Martha was on His way to Jerusalem — on the way to do the good thing for us that needed to be done. For in Jerusalem Christ became our suffering listener. There He listened to horrible insults. There He listened to the shrill cry of the crowd, "Crucify, crucify Him." All this He heard, and all this happened to Him. Why? He was doing this in our place. He was taking the punishments which we deserved. Our poor attention to God is but a symptom of all that is wrong in our very nature (1 Peter 2:24). It is by the power of this "good part" which cannot be taken away. (V.42c, 1 Peter 1:24, 25)

Conclusion

How is your listening? That is the question for Septuagesima Sunday. But even more important is your answer. That answer has been given today by your attendance and

your attention. Part of the answer will be indicated by your attitude toward the sacrament we celebrate. And much of the answer remains to be spelled out in this week's living.

SEXAGESIMA

HOW IS YOUR BELIEVING?

JOHN 11:20-27

Introduction

We are stepping onto the second span of that bridge which leads us over from the banks of Epiphany to the shores of Lent. Today we are confronted with another pre-Lenten question. The question for today is

How Is Your Believing?

I. *Are You Completely Confident in What Jesus Can Do?*

A. *We often do not show such confidence.* See the difference in response between Mary and Martha in v.20. Martha "went," but Mary "sat." We cannot be sure of Mary's motive, but Martha, outwardly at least, seemed to show the greater confidence in Jesus. Martha, however, also showed a limited idea of what Jesus could do (v.21). She seemed to be scolding Jesus as she had done in Luke 10:40. She seemed to think He had to be on the scene to perform a miracle. Didn't she know what Jesus could do (Luke 7:10)? We often have our doubts about Jesus' power — simply because He does not always do what we want when we want it. We are often tempted to feel the mood of the opening words in today's Introit.

B. *Yet, we must grow in the confidence of faith* (v.22). We must grow in the conviction that no matter how difficult times may be, the power of Jesus is unlimited. Look at Paul in today's Epistle. Look at Abraham, first believing an astounding promise (Gen. 15), and then obeying a difficult command (Gen. 22). Hebrews 11 cites

many more, always preceding the account with the words "by faith." All this is in the spirit of the closing words of today's Introit.

II. *Do You Really Know Who Jesus Is?*

A. *Our knowledge is often limited.* It was with Mary and Martha despite their many contacts with Jesus. It was with the disciples also (Matt. 8:24-27; 16:21-23; John 14:7-13). It is often that way with us. The seed of God's Word often finds poor soil in our hearts. (Luke 8:4-15)

B. *We must know Christ for what He truly is, Savior, Redeemer, Lord* (v. 27, Luke 2:11, John 1:41, Matt. 16:16). Luther says, "You must rely with constant trust on this, that Christ died for your sins; such faith justifies you." In such knowledge we too can grow, as the seed of God's Word hits the good soil of our hearts. (Luke 8:4-15)

III. *Only Christ Can Give Such Confident Knowledge.*

A. *As He permits us to see how much we need Him.* Mary and Martha saw this through the tragic death of their brother. Some of us have been taught in the same severe way. It is then especially that Christ can find us calling for Him, as did Mary and Martha. Sometimes tragedy can be the best thing for us—if it causes us to see how weak and sinful we are and how desperately we need Christ as our Savior.

B. *As He then gives Himself to us* (vv. 25, 26). Luther says, "We Christians, however, who have been redeemed through the precious blood of God's Son, should by practice become accustomed in faith to despise death and to look upon it as a deep, sound, sweet sleep, to consider the coffin as nothing but our Lord Jesus' bosom or Paradise, the grave as nothing but a soft bed of ease and rest." For the Christians, natural life is directly connected to eternal life. The Christian knows that really he never dies. His natural life's ending will mark the be-

ginning of eternal life. It was by the power of Christ's death and resurrection that the disciples grew to such confident knowledge of Christ. It changed them from timid men to bold conquerors for Christ. The power of His resurrection can have the same effect on us.

Conclusion

"Do you believe this?" Christ asked of Martha. Christ still asks us today. How is your believing? That is the question for Sexagesima Sunday. Jesus Christ gives us His body and blood to help us give the solid answer, "Lord, I believe." His Word in Scripture and sacrament is His answer to our prayer, "Help Thou my unbelief."

QUINQUAGESIMA

HOW IS YOUR SERVING?

MARK 10:35-45

Introduction

We are stepping onto the final span of that bridge which leads us over from Epiphany to Lent. Before we cross over, we are again confronted with a pre-Lenten question. Our question for today is

How Is Your Serving?

I. *Do You Serve Because You See a Chance to Gain?*

A. *The gain of having Christ do as you please?* (v. 35). James and John tried to do what pleased Christ in the hope that now Christ would do what pleased them. How is it with you? Do you pay attention to Christ with the expectation that now He should pay special attention to you? You don't do for Christ so that Christ will then do as you please (1 Cor. 13:5; James 4:3). What is man? This is what he has become—so self-centered that he even thinks he can bargain with God, so far from his first love that he only wants to be served, not to serve.

B. *The gain of having Christ pay you for your goodness?* (v.37). The disciples dictated exactly what wages they wanted for having served Christ. They did not want their pay checks written in terms of dollars, but in terms of recognition. Other experiences with Christ caused them to think that they might be entitled to some double honor (Mark 5:37; Matt. 17:1). Your motives for serving Christ may seem to be noble. But they can also be quite tainted. It is natural to expect something in return from Christ. And when you don't get what you think you have coming to you, it is natural to complain. What is "natural"—does it mean the same as "normal"? And are natural, normal human responses right? What is normal and natural to sinful man is frequently unnatural and abnormal—for we are to be as God created us, holy as He is holy.

II. *Do You Serve Because You See a Chance to Give?*

A. *Possibly giving yourself in suffering?* (vv. 38, 39). In the Old Testament, the cup was running over (Ps. 23:5). If all was not so well, his cup was the cup of the Lord's fury (Is. 51:17). We know what type of cup it was from which Jesus had to drink (Mark 14:36). We also know from what kind of cup James and John had to drink (Acts 12:2; Rev. 1:9). By being baptized, Jesus meant that both He and they would be totally submerged in suffering (Ps. 42:7; 69:2; 124:4, 5). When you serve, and serve well, you cannot expect that life should be a bed of roses for you. In fact, all you might get in return are headaches and heartaches. You may be persecuted for your action. You may be criticized and become the victim of malicious gossip.

B. *Definitely giving yourself in serving others?* (vv. 33-44). Greatness, says Jesus, is not reducing others to serve you; it is rather reducing yourself to serve others (John 13:3-14). Both the words "minis-

ter" and "deaconess" mean "servant." Properly understood, every Christian man must be a minister and every Christian woman must be a deaconess.

III. *Christ Served by Giving Himself for Your Gain.*

A. *He gave Himself* (v.45). (Luke 18:31-34; John 15:13; Rom. 5:8) Christ did indeed serve that He might give. He gave Himself to God as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Now He gives Himself to you as your perfect Savior from sin. As you realize that the crucifixion is not just something you talk about, but rather something that really happened for you and because of you, you have the power to serve by giving yourself also.

B. *He gave Himself as your ransom* (v.45). Christ did indeed serve you well by giving Himself. He gave Himself that you might gain forgiveness of sin and the sure hope of heaven. (Titus 2:14; Col. 1:14; 1 Tim. 2:6; Heb. 9:12; Rev. 5:9)

Conclusion

As we now enter the Lenten season, we once more see our total spiritual helplessness. Once again, we cry with blind Bartimaeus in this morning's Gospel (Luke 18:38; cf. Mark 10:46). We recognize the Lenten message in this morning's Collect. We enter Lent fully recognizing our need for the strengthening power of the Passion story. We look to the remembering of all He did for us as we receive His body and blood given for us. God will strengthen us as we submit ourselves to His Word, as we receive His grace in the sacrament. And as we are strengthened in our convictions, we can begin to give more adequate answers to our three pre-Lenten questions. How is your listening? How is your believing? How is your serving?

Glenview, Ill. RICHARD G. MAASSEL

INVOCAVIT

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

MATT. 16:21-26

Background

Jesus left Galilee with His disciples and went to Tyre and Sidon. He then went to Decapolis and performed miracles, including the feeding of the four thousand. The Pharisees requested signs of the Lord, but Jesus cautioned His disciples against the Pharisees. Immediately before speaking the words of our text, Jesus had asked the disciples: "Who do men say that the Son of Man is?" And Peter had given his confession. Matthew now links our text to this confession by saying, "From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer. . . ."

Textual Study

Jesus *shows* His disciples: that is, He reveals something to them. The word is not only used with objects that can be seen, but with visions, revelations of the unseen. . . . Jerusalem: the city of King David, the city of the great temple. Here Christ would show Himself as priest and king. . . . Elders, chief priests, and scribes: the three groups constitute the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews. Though it had authority only in Judea, the Jews did not question the authority of the body even in other parts of Palestine. They recognized it as the final court of appeal. The Sanhedrin had power to try men, but the death sentence had to be ratified by the procurator. . . . Be killed: the word denotes any method of robbing of life. . . . Be raised: at times used with the addition "from the dead," but here it is used absolutely. . . . Began to rebuke: this may be censure, but could also be a warning, a speaking seriously. We need not picture Peter as seeking to lord it over Christ. . . . Satan: usually refers to *the* adversary of God. Peter is called by this name because he is prompted by Satan to tempt Christ to turn from His

saving work. . . . Save life and lose it: life to be thought of here as the self-centered life.

Introduction

Refer to Christ's temptation in the wilderness. Show how Satan offered substitutes to Christ, seeking at the very beginning of Christ's ministry to draw Him away from His purpose as Savior. Satan is still offering substitutes.

Don't Settle for Satan's Substitutes

I. *A Popular Christ Instead of the Christ of Our Salvation*

A. Peter's concept of Christ's role on earth: Go on as you were, working miracles, helping people, and gaining recognition. Satan is still suggesting that this is the kind of Christ we need — One who knows us and will help us to live a good life, while we remain completely unconcerned about death and the judgment. Such a make-believe Jesus would make us feel good. But note that Peter's concept is Satan's concept of Christ's role. Don't accept a make-believe Jesus. He can do you no good.

B. God's plan of salvation through Christ: Jesus points out that He must suffer and die. Not that God is forced to save man, but God has planned to save him, has promised to save him, and Jesus is now obediently following the plan of God. For Him there is a *must* in suffering and dying. Any effort to make Christ's death unnecessary is satanic. It is contrary to the will of God. The manner of Christ's suffering and the extent of it are part of the theme for the midweekly services. Here we stress the importance of it and the fact that we can take no substitute for it. Christ is the only Savior. There is no salvation in any other, and salvation lies in the fact that He, as the substitute of man, suffered and died for man. It is equally important that He rose for man, thus breaking death's chain.

Through death He destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the devil.

However, more important than the devil's loss is Christ's gain. Through His death He brings many with Him. Thank God we are among those who have been saved by Him. But the new life of the saved is clearly described in the text. Here again the devil would lead us to accept substitutes.

II. *An Easy Life Instead of One That Is Too Christlike*

A. A denial *to* self, not *of* self. Jesus tells His disciples, "Deny yourselves." The devil knows when speaking to a child of God that he cannot come out boldly and contradict the Lord, so he goes along with His admonition. He says, "By all means, deny yourselves. In Lent especially, deny yourselves a candy bar a day, a pack of cigarettes every day or at least a pack a week. Deny yourselves some luxury. It will make you feel good. People will realize that you are serious about Lent, that it means something to you." What a poor substitute that is for what Christ is asking here. He tells us to deny ourselves, to say no to what we are and what we want by nature, to admit that of ourselves we are nothing but sinners deserving of hell; that our natural inclinations are no better than those of the unbeliever. We must deny this part of us any right to control our lives, to suggest the things that are good for us. As Christians we have a higher purpose in life. Here a brief reference can be made to the Epistle for the day in which Paul pleads that we do not receive the grace of God in vain. That grace is given to us that we may live our lives to God. A vain use of it would be disastrous. On the other hand, the very fact that we have received this grace of God will enable us to deny ourselves and to live our lives to Christ.

B. A cross that is worn, not borne. Jesus says, "Take up your cross." The devil is ready to agree. "Yes, by all means, get a cross. Everyone is wearing buttons and pins

that identify the wearer. Why not the Christian? Get a cross and let people know that you are one of a group. Get a cross for your home that glows in the dark. It will help you to find your way around at night. By all means, get a cross. But don't put it into your heart. Don't let it be the cross of Christ. Don't let it remind you of His suffering, of the fact that He died for you." Now He says, "Take up *your* cross." Each of us will have one, a cross of suffering accompanied by shame and disgrace, a cross that we bear because we are the children of God. Consider this an honor that you are permitted to bear this cross, as did Peter on another occasion, when he and John were threatened by the same leaders that were to take Christ and put Him to death.

C. Following our own, not Christ's, purpose in life. "Follow me," says Jesus, and at once the devil agrees. "Yes, by all means, follow Jesus. Note that He was a man of authority. Exert your authority too. Note that He didn't let the scribes and pharisees, the leaders of the Jews, get away with things. Follow Him in this. Note how popular He was with the masses. You can learn from Him. Learn of Jesus to be concerned about others." That is what the devil told Peter. And so Peter was very much concerned about Jesus. But he was following his own purpose, not the purpose of God.

Today the devil is suggesting all kinds of purposes for the church: the social gospel, promotion of any and every plan for the betterment of man. Jesus was concerned about the masses. We should be, also. But the devil's suggestion is always of a secular nature. What a poor substitute for what the Lord would have us do. When He calls upon us to follow Him, He wants us to follow Him in His teaching, to accept His Gospel and in the strength of it to show His love to men, giving them of our earthly gifts, it is true, but especially giving them the comfort of His Word.

REMINISCERE

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

LUKE 10:17-20

Background

Close to the end of Christ's ministry, He sent 70, or possibly 72, men into cities and villages that He had not yet visited. They were to prepare the way for Him. In the meantime, Jesus attended the Feast of Tabernacles. In John 7 and 8 we have an account of Jesus' activity at the feast. Note the urgency of the Lord as He addresses the people of Jerusalem, seeking to bring them to faith. It is this concern for men that prompted Him to send the Seventy into other villages and towns.

Textual Study

The Seventy are referred to only at the beginning of this chapter and in our text. No mention is made of them anywhere else. We have no names of individuals included in the group. On their mission tour they devoted themselves wholly to serving the Lord, proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God. . . . The demons were evil spirits, independent beings, occupying a position between the human and the divine. . . . Satan falls like lightning from heaven: most likely not a reference to the fall of Satan at the beginning of time, but taking place each time the devil was robbed of his power, as the disciples of the Lord with power from Christ drove out Satan. . . . "Written in heaven" is obviously symbolical picture language, indicating that they, the disciples of the Lord, are known to God as belonging to Him and having a place with Him in heaven.

Introduction

What if the Lord were to come to you as He did to King Solomon and open His treasures to you and say, "Ask whatever you wish"? What would you ask? Since we

still have the old nature within us, we are tempted, of course, to ask for many worldly things. But even as Christians we do not always know how to evaluate God's gifts. We need guidance and direction in choosing the best gifts. Such direction Christ gives in our text.

The Greatest Gift the Lord Can Give
to His Own

I. *It Is Not Miracle-Working Power*

A. This had been given to the disciples. The instruction given them mentions the healing of the sick. They had extended it to driving out Satan, freeing people who were possessed. In our text the Lord indicates that this power will continue. Serpents and scorpions, both of them thought to have a deadly sting, and both of them symbolizing the realm of evil, will prove no match for them in their work.

Christians have often asked why such power has not been given to the church today. Some go so far as to believe that it has and seek to perform "miracles."

B. The Seventy considered this a great gift. They were overjoyed at the thought that the devils were subject to them. This gift was given to support their preaching of the Word, but they saw it as an end in itself to be cherished and used.

C. If the Lord had so thought of this gift, He would have used it at once in the meeting with the Syro-Phoenician woman of the Gospel for today without spending much time preparing the woman for the miracle in the way He did. Had He merely freed the girl from the devil that possessed her, He would have brought great happiness to this home in the north country. But life there might still have been without God. The Lord therefore directed the woman and, through her, the daughter to a greater gift and in our text directs the Seventy to this gift as well.

II. *It Is Salvation*

A. First for ourselves. It was important that the Seventy realize that the greatest gift that God could give them was a place in heaven. This was still in prospect for them; their names were written there. They themselves still had work to do on earth. Yet while carrying on their work they must be mindful of the fact that they are the saved of Christ. This is what He has meant to them.

How easy it is for Christians to forget that this is the greatest thing that God can do for them. No position on earth, no calling whatever, can in any way be compared with the call to discipleship, the call to faith which includes the glorious inheritance that is imperishable and undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for us.

B. When we keep clearly in mind that salvation is our greatest gift, then we know what to do for others, whatever our calling in life may be. The Seventy healed others, they drove out devils, but the greatest gift they gave to others was the knowledge of Christ and of His kingdom. When they came with that message, they set men free from Satan not only for time but for eternity. In the measure in which we appreciate the message for ourselves, we will bring it to others as the best gift that we can give them from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

OCULI

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

LUKE 9:51-56

Textual Study

When the days drew near: literally a "filling up of the days," giving evidence of the fact that in God's plan a day had been appointed when all should be fulfilled. . . . For Him to be received up (*ἀναλήψεως*): this is the only place in Scripture where the word is used, and its meaning has been debated. The natural meaning is ascension,

but here it seems preferable to refer it to the whole complex of events which began at Jerusalem and ended with the Ascension. He set His face: this shows His firm desire to do what God had planned. . . . Fire from heaven: this is reminiscent of Elijah's calling for fire from heaven to consume two captains with their companies of 50 men each who had come to take Him captive and bring Him to the king. This occurred in the same neighborhood in which the Lord had sought lodging and might, in part, account for James' and John's strange request.

Introduction

One of our folk songs has the sad refrain, "When will they ever learn?" It tells of girls picking flowers, growing up, getting married, sending their husbands off to war, laying them in the graveyards where flowers grow. Other girls come to pick the flowers, grow up, marry, send their husbands off to war, once again to fill the graveyards and always and again the sad refrain, "When will they ever learn?"

Even more pathetic is man's failure to heed the plans of God. These have been taught in every generation, but a large majority of people have always rejected them.

Will Men Ever Learn Not to Oppose God's Gracious Plans?

I. *Jesus was Very Intent on Carrying Out God's Plan for Men*

Six months prior to the time that He would be crucified for the sins of the world, He set His face resolutely to go to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem He would proclaim Himself the One sent by God. His teachings would become more and more pointed, His warnings more severe, His pleas more intense. He would be setting the stage for His glorious entry into Jerusalem but also for the events that would follow in quick succession during that week.

He knew the whole plan, knew it well, and resolutely determined to carry out every portion of it. His plan was to save the lost. He who as the Son of Man would some day come in the clouds of heaven to judge all men, would, before His ascension, do all that was necessary to give men a way of escape from this terrible judgment. All people, all nations, and all languages would be included in His plan. He would die for all.

II. The Samaritans Were Slow to Accept God's Gracious Plan

Jesus was a Jew, and the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans. So the Samaritans wanted no part of anything that the Jews could offer, not even salvation. They had their own holy mountain, their own laws and precepts, their own views of God and of His plans. So they sent their Lord away. Would they ever learn not to oppose God's gracious plans?

Thanks to the patience of God, they had another chance. The evangelist Philip came into Samaria years later with a message of the crucified and risen Christ, and the Samaritans received the message in large numbers, so that even the apostles took note of Philip's successful work and assured the Samaritans of the truth of his message. God's plan of salvation was also for them.

III. Even the Apostles Were Not Always Sure of God's Plan

James and John were slow to believe the plan of God for the salvation of men. They

thought that they were fighting for Christ and for His honor when they suggested that fire should be brought from heaven to consume the Samaritans. They thought this was in keeping with the teaching of God's Word, that they were learning this lesson from Elijah. They would think of it as righteous wrath, little realizing that actually they were causing Christ's house to be divided. Yet a house divided against itself cannot stand. Would the disciples ever learn not to oppose God's gracious plan? Peter had been rebuked as the mouthpiece of Satan. Now James and John take their place at his side.

These three had witnessed the Transfiguration. They had heard Christ foretell His suffering, death, and resurrection. Would they ever learn? Thank God for His patience in dealing with them, for calling them together again after His resurrection, for leading them out to Bethany and blessing them there before His ascension, for giving them the Spirit at Pentecost. By God's grace they learned and believed and witnessed.

IV. What About Us? Have We Learned?

In the Epistle for today Paul pleads with us to put away the sins of the flesh. Have we learned to do so? He urges us to walk in the Spirit. Are we doing so? We can with His help. The Savior is still enlisting us in His work, reminding us that He went into death for us. Will we learn to take Him fully at His Word?

Springfield, Ill.

MARK J. STEEGE