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Homiletics

Mack Goeglein

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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HOMILETICS

INTRODUCTION

The protests — three postcards — that reached the staff the Monday after the November issue's Advent dialog sermon were countered by the flood — 300 — of requests for mimeographed copies of the other sermons the Rev. John Sternberg had prepared in the series. What happened in the Advent services of the other 6,000 parishes into which these homiletic notes found their way most of us can guess only on the basis of the sermons we heard.

Because of the preaching we have heard, many will be very ready for the samples of contemporary approaches to preaching that appear in this issue. What's significant about them? It would be interesting to start you off completely on your own and wait for you to tell us the answer. But you might not write, and we would never know whether you knew.

What's new about these sermons is that on three consecutive Sundays in Lent the basic process of the Law and the Gospel, enunciated freshly in contemporary idiom, is initiated in the lives of Christian hearers. This is old stuff, some will say, not contemporary preaching at all. The staff agrees. Because there is not nearly enough of this Lutheran clarity of Law and Gospel, such sermons can scarcely be called contemporary preaching. But the times call out for it. And the congregations of God's people can be continually blessed by it. Try these — three Sundays in a row.

It is true that the times also cry out for fresh phrases. "What does God do? Give them the Promised Land, that's what! One would think that by that time God would've wised up. But He didn't . . . and that was the Gospel for that people of old. *And He still hasn't wised up . . . and that is the Gospel for us!*" (Some staff members reacted negatively to Pastor Goeglein's fresh phrasing, but when the Homiletics editor cracks the whip around here, everyone gives in. ED.)

But if there are some who still think that these sermons are "the same old stuff," if some think that the preaching of the Law and the Gospel is so old that it cannot possibly reach today's man as something new, the warning might be given to read carefully the last section of the first sermon. "If we can't identify ourselves with the God-users who would take Christ by force and make Him our Santa Claus king, if we have successfully immunized ourselves against the judgment of God on our efforts to use Him as we please, then the Gospel naturally is not really Gospel. It's just words (the 'same old stuff') instead of the shocking activity of God being merciful to those who are without mercy. The real trouble then does not lie with the Gospel, that it is the same old stuff ('When you've heard it once, you've heard it all'); it is rather that we refuse to subject ourselves to the law of God that it may 'do *its* stuff,' its task of exposing us as we really are apart from Jesus Christ."

There are two things, then, that come through in a study of these sermons. The one is the important realization that nothing which is spoken has really been said unless it is heard. If we have been preaching the Law and the Gospel as something that all of us have heard so many times before that we do not find it compelling, exciting, and transforming, then we have not really been preaching. The second thing is that if we have been speaking a law which has not had a killing effect on the hearer, then we have been talking *about* the Law instead of wielding the two-edged sword. If we have been able to speak a "gospel" that has not brought the hearer to the condition of "shaking his head and clearing his ears upon hearing it," which has not brought the hearer to exclaim, "It's too good to be true!" then we have not really been preaching the Gospel.

Are we prepared to put our sermons to that test? Are we ready to check on the vitality of our expressions and at the same time honestly attempt to measure the killing

power and the resurrecting power of the Law and the Gospel?

These three sermons give opportunity for a checkup on the tools we are providing for the Spirit of God. God's purpose today is to keep doing what He did that first Lent through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Think of it — now He works with our sermons and with us! God in Christ! God in you! God in sermons!

Perhaps there should be a new confession for preachers: "O Almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto You all the good sermons with which I have ever offended You. . . ." G. W. H.

LAETARE

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

JOHN 6:1-15

Count Your Blessings — and
Watch Yourself

In today's Gospel on the feeding of the 5,000 there seems to be a kind of "chemical reaction" happening. It's not like what happens in my magic set of chemical Sunday school illustrations — ugly liquid plus red liquid equals pure and clear liquid; instead one might phrase it this way: Take a blessing of God, add man, and you come out with a curse.

I

This kind of reaction is hard to miss in the text. There was a large number of people pressing around Jesus to hear Him. Since there was no food handy, the Lord pitied the hungry people and decided to give them a meal before they returned to their homes. The amazing way He did this, to feed so many with so little — five loaves and two fishes — you have heard again in the Gospel.

At this point we have seen the first two ingredients of our chemical recipe — the blessing of God in Jesus Christ and the people so beautifully blessed.

In v. 15 we see the outcome: "Perceiving

then that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, Jesus withdrew again to the hills by Himself." There you see it completely: blessing of God plus man equals curse. It takes little imagination to guess accurately just why the multitude wanted to take Jesus by force and make Him their king. Wow! Talk about the Great Society! Talk about War on Poverty! Talk about a national health plan or a shorter work week! All the present-day amateurs put together couldn't hold a candle to Jesus of Nazareth. "Jesus, your majesty. Guess what? Our Deepfreeze is empty again." Or, "Our chariot's broken" or "gone out of style," and "we need a new and bigger one" . . . or, "I have a stomachache," and so on and on.

II

The problem confronting us should be obvious by now. It is the problem of loving the things God gives rather than the God who gives them. They say that fathers, perhaps especially of teen-agers, often feel a bit like Jesus must have felt. You know the cartoons: the cute little teen-ager starts making a fuss over her dad, and her dad begins more or less automatically to reach for his wallet. But this may not be such a good parallel. Most teen-agers love their dads as well as their dads' wallets. A better example would be jolly old St. Nick. The more Christmases I observe, the more happy I am that Santa Claus is mythical. If he were not, there would be need for a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Santa Claus. Even as myth he seems not to be cared about one bit. He is simply a symbol of "what I want for Christmas." He counts only inasmuch as he delivers the goods. And this, of course (says the text), is the trouble with people over against God, namely, that the religious man would love God primarily as a "good deal," as a kind of "for real" Santa Claus. Such an attitude is only a somewhat more

subtle way of attempting to "take Him by force and make Him king." "And," that opinion continues, "if we stay on the good side of this king, we'll get lots more things in the future. The sky's (heaven, that is) the limit!" Looking at this from a slightly different angle, we see the basic sin of *using God*.

Have you pondered lately how easily and profitably your Mr. Flesh has used God? I know that, as a sinner, I could scarcely get along without him. Indeed, God is indispensable for many, many kinds of people:

for

children afraid of the dark;
politicians running for office;
husbands trying to win arguments with
their wives . . . or vice versa;
pastors and laymen trying to make a parish program work.

God is indispensable for many, many things:

for avoiding responsibility to act in mercy through praying;
for avoiding the reality of suffering, pain, and death;
for pursuing a "just" war;
for faith without discipleship;
for forgiveness without repentance;
for resurrection without death.

You know and I know that God is not a heavenly tool set aside for our personal use, however nice or even religious that use may appear to be. At least when we think about it seriously, we know this. We know that God is not our tool—He is our God! Yet it is precisely here that we see the details of the human predicament very clearly. When we are wrong or immoral, we are actually discarding God, working at life without the help of God. And the wages of that sin is death. On the other hand, when we are good and moral, we try to use Him. And "all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." We can't win.

III

Yet we do . . . in Jesus Christ! Think of the Israelites in the Exodus for a moment. Pharaoh's chariots are right behind them, about to close in. "We should never have left Egypt, Lord. How could we have agreed to this! Now we're going to die." But the Lord takes care of those chariots. "Thanks, Lord. How could we have doubted! Never again!" A little while later in the wilderness. "We're hungry . . . starving to death out here in this desert. At least we had three square meals a day and a roof over our heads back in Egypt, Lord." So the Lord provides them with food and drink. "Thanks, Lord. Never will we act like this again." A bit later Moses leaves the people to go talk with God on Mount Sinai for more than a whole month. "See, now both Moses and God have deserted us way out in this wilderness. We'd better have a new god. Aaron, make us a golden calf." Moses pleads with God to spare them despite their idolatry, and God does. "Thanks, God. You're great. Don't worry; we'll never do that again!" They get to the Promised Land. "Man, you should have seen the size of those guys! We'll never be able to take the Promised Land. Good grief, God. All this way and all this time for nothing!" Yet what does God do? Give them the Promised Land, that's what! One would think that by that time God would've wised up. But He didn't . . . and that was the Gospel for that people of old. *And He still hasn't wised up . . . and that is the Gospel for us!* God still hasn't wised up. The Lord's death for us on the cross surely shows us that. No wonder the Gospel . . . the preaching of the cross . . . is called foolishness.

IV

Possibly an outsider (and probably a lot of us insiders, too) might think that preaching this Gospel is pretty foolish. The diagnosis of the human situation . . . that's one

thing. Lots of variety of thought. But the Gospel? Same old stuff. This, of course, is absurd. How can the Gospel of Christ possibly be "the same old stuff" for sinners, for God-users? This may be the problem. If we can't identify ourselves with the god-users who would take Christ by force and make Him our Santa Claus king, if we have successfully immunized ourselves against the judgment of God on our efforts to use Him as we please, then the Gospel naturally is not really Gospel. It's just words (the "same old stuff") instead of the shocking activity of God being merciful to those who are without mercy.

The real trouble then does not lie with the Gospel, that it is the same old stuff ("when you've heard it once, you've heard it all"); it is rather that we refuse to subject ourselves to the law of God that it may "do *its* stuff," its task of exposing us as we really are apart from Jesus Christ.

But for the man so exposed, for you and for me now, the Gospel can never be "the same old stuff." Rather, it has to be "too good to be true!" The God-user (just like the Israelite of old) has to shake his head and clear his ears upon hearing it. Too good, indeed! But free, too! Look at us—at one another—at the whole Christian church, confronted by God again and again and stunned by that gracious confrontation, mumbling over and over:

Can't be! Too good to be true! Me, a son of God! Me, a brother of Jesus Christ! Me, a participant in God's own life! Unbelievable! In Christ—His life and death and resurrection—I've been given a glimpse into the heart of God Himself, and what I've seen there is the mercy of a loving Father. In the gift of His body and blood I've tasted the Gospel itself—forgiveness of sin, life and salvation. It's impossible! It's too good to be true! But it is! It is!

Glory Be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost. As It Was in the Be-

ginning, Is Now, and Ever Shall Be, World Without End. Amen.

Valparaiso, Indiana MACK GOEGLIN

JUDICA

THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

MATTHEW 21:33-43

The New Israel in Fact

The mercy and peace of our God, in Jesus Christ, be yours. Amen.

There seems to be something strange about this parable. Most parables had meanings that were hidden. Jesus would often tell them in public, then He would take His disciples aside privately and say, "Now I'll tell you what I meant by this parable." Here, obviously, the exact opposite is true. He wanted the temple leaders to know exactly what the parable of the Householder and His Vineyard meant.

During this past week I secured some sermon information and material for today from our day school youngsters in Matins. They interpreted this parable very accurately. The vineyard owner is God, and the son, whom he ultimately sends to his death, thinking the tenants will respect him, is God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. The first tenants were the old Israel, the Old Covenant people. The new tenants, as we Christians today surely would recognize (with our chests and egos inflated), would be the new Israel, the holy Christian church. The servants were the prophets. Remember how one after the other came with the prophetic word, and one after the other was either ignored or mistreated or killed? Then Jesus, with no subtlety whatsoever, said, "In case you have not understood what this parable is about, folks, let Me tell you. My good friends, you Pharisees, chief priests, scribes, you religious leaders, the kingdom of God is going to be taken away from you and it is going

to be given to another group, another nation, who will produce the fruits of it."

One urgent warning that reaches us at once is that we, the new Israel, must be on guard lest we revert to being old Israel. And one of our dangers is that we misread the Scriptures, that we obtusely fail to get the point God is making. We must avoid the approach to Scriptures (parables, perhaps, especially) which sees only neat little Bible history lessons in which we should find some neat little applications. We surely could come up with something—"Please Lord, if You send more prophets, don't let us stone them." Or, "Please let us admit that whores and internal revenue people will get to heaven, too. . . ." Of course, this is facetious. I hope we want more than a dead Bible history lesson when we approach Scriptures. I hope we want a lively Word that will go out and do what it's talking about, that will accomplish, as one prophet said, "the things for which God sent it."

To have this happen, it would profit us to be empathic with the chief priests and the Pharisees to whom Jesus was speaking. Furthermore, I don't believe we have to be phony to do this. Can you imagine in that time of history, with that type of "church" in operation, what kind of thoughts were going through the minds of these people as Jesus was condemning them in such a sharp way? I would guess they would be something like this:

The man is mad! He is either insane or He is demon-possessed or indeed the devil himself in human clothing.

(Does it remind you of what you heard in the Gospel today?) "You have to be either the Nazarene Nut or the Nazarene Demon, one or the other, because here you claim that these people who with wild abandon trample the law of God underfoot have a higher standing with God than we, the guardians of the Law."

You understand that whores were not nice

people, and they did not keep the law of God. Neither did publicans. Now as Jesus told this parable and explained it, perhaps one or the other of the leaders may have admitted:

At times in our history, perhaps, Your words would have had meaning, Your claim that God is going to take away the Kingdom from us and give it to others. I remember those wilderness years, for example. But we're not going around building golden calves or saying manna isn't good enough. This is a new age, and it's a golden age of Judaism.

I would wager, in fact, that if they wanted to they could have quoted some interesting statistics. They might have said:

Doesn't this madman know that temple worship is up 20 percent this year? That more Jews are tithing than ever before and . . . ahem! some of us are even doing better than that? Doesn't He know that we have had more Gentile converts in the first five months of this year than we had in the whole of last year? All He has to do is open His eyes and see. Religion has never flourished more than it is now. People are more active religiously, more zealous religiously, more faithful to the law of God than perhaps at any time in the history of Israel. And now this madman comes along and tells us that God, this God of the Law, is going to take the Kingdom away from us and give it to someone else. Well, He's either the devil or He's mad.

Of course, you see, they didn't get the point. I sometimes fear that we're not always getting the point either. The point becomes most clear if we go back to those prophets in the parable. What did they do when they came to the old covenant people? What was their word from God? Never was their word: "Come on now! You're not going to the temple very often. Let's do a little better job of this." Or: "You're fasting not enough and not purely enough. You're snitching little bites here and there." Never did they sell slogans: "Remember the family that tithes together thrives together."

Theirs was always a single basic message. It was: REPENT! And when Israel was bogged down in the wilderness with the worst kind of adulterous idolatry; when they were a-whoring after false gods; when they lived in the stench of filth and immorality, the word from the prophet was: REPENT! And when the Children of Israel were good; when they were religiously devout and faithful; when they observed their temple and synagog worship with a frightening degree of loyalty and zeal, the word of the prophets was the same. It was: REPENT.

You see, people have never lived a life of God except through repentance. Never! That was true of the Old Covenant. Don't think that people lived by the Law in the Old Covenant, in contrast to living now by the Gospel in the New Covenant. The Law showed them their need to repent. People have always lived on repentance. And when John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth came along in the New Covenant era, they had a message. The message was: "Repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Understand, God was not just chiding people because all fathers like to chide. The purpose of repentance is the life of God. The purpose of repentance is the mercy of God. The Word of God causes us to renounce our evil *and* our morality as our hold on Him and to taste the love of a Father on account of Christ, our Brother and Savior. This is so hard to learn.

I find a great irony in our time in the ways we look at inner-city missionaries. We in suburbia see them as the ones who really have it tough, the ones who are going to do nothing but spend endless time, sweat, blood, and tears in a barren field. Perhaps it is true that the inner city is a barren field for the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. But if so, then we ought to say why and say it very clearly and loudly. It's because our living of Christianity hasn't fit the message of Christianity for people who are oppressed and suffering and rejected. And I would suggest,

if the New Testament is right at all, that had we, the holy Christian and apostolic church, for generations given ourselves to and for the world, as God's good suffering and redemptive Servant did, the inner city would be the ripest field of all for the Word of God. Make no mistake, our men in the inner city need courage and great love. But the fact remains that if you want to talk about a really hard field to work in, talk about suburbia. Our challenge as people of God in this town is about as great as one is going to find anyplace on God's earth. Our pastoral challenge as shepherds of suburban congregations is about as tough a challenge as could be found anyplace in God's good church. Not because you're bad; but because you're good.

This is what the parable is talking about.

Would you join me in making a suggestion to our liturgical commission that when they draw up a new service they have an alternate form of confession. We couldn't call it the "confession of sin"; we'd have to call it the "confession of goodness." But it wouldn't sound too much different. The words would be something like this—and I'm asking you to join me as I confess them:

O Almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable, moral man, confess unto You all my goodness, my righteousness with which I have ever offended You and forever offend You and justly deserve for You to take the Kingdom away from me and give it to another. Especially I confess to You that I am humble . . . and I know it; that, when I love my neighbor, I'm very well aware of it; that, when I treat my wife well, I am very cognizant of my well-doing. Indeed, all the goodness that I possess, I confess to You, God. I take that goodness and join it to my bag of sins, my lovelessness and my wrong acts, and I place it at the cross, begging, "For the sake of Jesus Christ, be done with it. Father, let me be done with it!"

I renounce this goodness, this sin, and I pray You of Your boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter suffer-

ing and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, good creature.

Only as we remember that the one way for the new Israel to stay new is the way of repentance will the new Israel in name be the new Israel in fact.

Valparaiso, Indiana MACK GOEGLBIN

PALMARUM

THE SUNDAY BEFORE EASTER

MATTHEW 17:24-27

Free to Give Up Your Rights

This is rather an unspectacular text at first glance. It is sandwiched between two great and important parts of St. Matthew's Gospel. Right before this is one of these stirring and moving prophecies in which the Lord spoke about His forthcoming suffering and death. Immediately after the text is the famous "childlike faith" section which includes that somber millstone warning for those "offending one of the little ones who believe" in the Lord. Now we see the text, and it's almost as if it doesn't fit. So many important things going on, and all of a sudden we have this little interlude about some people bugging Peter as to whether or not Jesus would pay the tax. One can easily be confused about the point of the text as well. I revealed myself as confused in choosing the second hymn of the day. Perhaps you noticed it was a national hymn. When the hymns were selected and the topic chosen last Tuesday in time for the newspaper announcement, I was in a hurry and zoomed through the Revised Standard Version account of the text and thought, "Oh good! An opportunity to preach on church and state." Then I started to study the text and discovered that this has nothing to do with the state. This was not a Roman tax at all. This was a temple tax. It would be more parallel to the talk about "church dues" instead of taxes for the state.

We did get the topic changed in the paper, but we forgot the second hymn. Well, it's good to sing hymns about the nation once in a while.

The point is, this was the temple tax that had existed for centuries for the people of Israel. Every male over 19 years of age had to pay each year a half-shekel for the upkeep of the temple. This was not the tithe either. That was something else. This was just for the upkeep of the worship properties in Jerusalem. Furthermore, we ought to note that this was not so small a tax as it sounds. You know, "What's a half-shekel?" A half-shekel in comparison to today was about a day and a half's wages. So this would be no little amount of money.

In this text the temple tax collector puts the bite on Peter. He says, "What about this master of yours? Is He going to pay the tax?" He probably felt that he had good reason to ask that question. Some of the things that Jesus said and did gave little indication that He was very fond of this sort of thing. So it was an honest question. Peter, as was the case with Peter almost always, immediately said, "Yes, He will!" and then had to run home to find out whether Jesus would.

Jesus answered him by posing the situation of a king and his taxes. He said, "Peter, from whom does the king exact tribute? His sons, or from the others?" One translator calls the others "aliens." Peter said, "Well, from others. He doesn't tax his own sons." Then Jesus said, "You see, in this case we're free." This meant: "We don't have to pay the temple tax, Peter. We don't have to pay it—but we will so we won't give offense to these people." Then He instructed Peter to make this fantastic fishing trip to get the shekel and pay off the temple tax for both the Lord and for Peter.

As we understand what was really going on, this text does become spectacular. It causes us to consider one of the thorniest, knottiest problems a Christian confronts in

his daily life. Martin Luther wrote a whole book on it. He made such statements as: "A Christian is free. He is a slave to no one." Then, in the very next breath, he said: "A Christian is not free, he is a slave to everyone." As stirring as this may sound, one is tempted to say: "Oh, fine! Now tell me what that means."

Consider St. Paul and we're not helped one bit. You know full well that he was a champion of Christian freedom. His bitterest foes were the Judaizers, the ones who wanted to take the Lord's freedom away from non-Jewish converts. They wanted them circumcised; they wanted them to follow all the Old Testament rules and rituals. St. Paul even got to the point of name-calling in his fight against anyone who would take away the freedom of the Christian man. Yet when we see what he *did* in comparison to what he *said*, we can only shake our heads and say, "What is this?" For example, he said to the Corinthian Christians: "Christians are *free* to eat meat that was once sacrificed to idols." He defended this position staunchly. He argued against the Judaizers who said: "Oh no! We dare not eat that meat." But then he turned around and said: "I'm abstaining! I'm not going to eat that meat even though I'm free to do so. I'm not going to, lest I be the cause of stumbling for a weak brother." He preached against the idea that a non-Jew had to be circumcised before he could become a Christian. Yet he had Timothy circumcised, whose father was a Greek, and once again for the sake of others, for the ministry and the church.

Furthermore, the Lord is not much help either. You remember all the freedom included in His words: "You continue in My Word, and you'll know the truth, and the truth will make you free!" He says here: "We're free of that temple tax. We're sons of the king. Let them collect from non-sons. *But* we'll give it anyway."

Now, after reviewing this sort of thing,

a person inside or outside the church asks the obvious question: "Well, what on earth good is this Christian freedom if a guy can't exercise it? What's the use of being free if a man must constantly act like a slave to other people?"

Let's first be clear about the fact that freedom is possible because of sonship. These sons of the king Jesus was talking about were not free from tribute because they were good people or because they had done well or had performed valiantly for their father-king. They were free from tribute simply because they were *sons* of the king. And conversely, any alien, no matter how fine he may have been, no matter how well he may have served the king, was not free of the tribute because he was not a son of the king. Jesus' point is that *the king's sons are free*. Furthermore, let's understand that we are talking about real rights here, not imagined ones. It's important to know that St. Paul was not a vegetarian when he said, "I'm going to give up meat eating so that I will not cause one of my weaker brothers to fall." Nor did he have a giant ulcer so that he had to live on poached eggs. He was giving up a right that he had. He had the right to eat idol meat and give thanks to God for it. But he took that right and he laid it aside for the sake of a brother.

To set aside real rights is extremely painful. You know the truth of that as well as I. A youngster, let's say, saves his piece of the family cake for later on. All the others have eaten their cake, but he saves it. It's his right to do so because it's his piece of cake. Later on arrives a little brother or sister with a hungry stomach and pleads, "Can I have some of your cake?" This youngster has a *real* right to say, "No, you may not! This is my cake, and I will eat it when I'm ready. You may not have any of it!" Or the youngster may set aside the right and say, "Here, you may have some of it." Or he may even say, "Here, you may have all of

it. You're hungry and I'm not." But the right is his to choose his action. It is a real right.

While you youngsters think about how painfully true that kind of thing is, I think we oldsters had better shift to something even more real for us. Think of what "hanging onto rights" does to a family. I'm again referring to *real* rights . . . the rights of justice for example. No family lives on justice. It is an impossibility. But justice gives rights. It gives the right to return an evil for an evil. It supplies the right of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." And it is desperately hard not to hang on to that right. A husband deserts a family because of some fierce unknown pressure, but later he comes back. The family has the right to say: "No, you *don't* come back! You chose freely to leave us; we choose freely to let you stay away. Those are the rights involved, and we cling to them."

Or what about St. Peter and his forgiveness question? He was really talking about his rights. "Lord, if someone offends me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?" What Peter was saying was: "When, finally, may I stop relinquishing my rights? When does my freedom mean that I can be what I am and exercise my rights as a free man?"

Or, are you aware of the born losers? A born loser is one who never wins. You have, I would guess, a born loser or two on whom you feed for your self's sake. Most of us do. They are the ones, you know, whom you can beat every time. Right or wrong, you can win every time. And how odd it is, you never seem to win enough. You may have won 19 consecutive times. You come to the 20th time, and perhaps the point at issue is absolutely nothing. It has no meaning or importance. Perhaps you're debating whether it rained last Thursday or Wednesday—some giant issue like that! At such a time, have you ever sensed the desperate need a

born loser has to be a winner once? Did you fail miserably in your painful struggle to relinquish your rights for once so that he could have some joy? It's hard to give up rights.

More important, it is necessary for us to know *why* it's hard. It's hard because man wants to be like God. Go right back to Eden, to the first sin in the Genesis story. There you see why it's hard to relinquish rights. Man is always seeking to be like God in one way or another. Some seem to think it their privilege to be like God, to insist on their own way as a right simply because they were born. Then the earth is that of which I am the center. This can make for some really irreligious, horrible living.

We can choose to be like God in another way, too, much better than the first way. It's the way of the Pharisee; namely, to be like God on the basis of Godlike actions. And everybody knows what Godlike actions are like. They are like—justice! Remember? One of the first attributes of God listed in the catechism is: God is just. So the more just we are and the more we strive for justice, the more Godlike we'll be. This becomes a way of life for some. Naturally, then, as we become more just, we feel we have more rights as sons of the King . . . perhaps as many as the King Himself.

But understand this: If we take either of these two routes to be like God, then hanging onto our rights is an absolute necessity. We cannot then let loose of our rights. We dare not cast them aside and pay the temple tax when we don't have to, or take an estranged loved one back when we don't have to, or share a piece of cake when we don't have to. All these kinds of actions would do away with that image of God. Because, you see, as everyone knows, God is a *winner*; He's not a *loser*. God is *strong*; He's not *weak*. God is *somebody*; He's not *nobody*. So, if this is the way I lay claim to being a son of God, then, above all, I *dare not relinquish*

my rights. That would be the last thing to do, because every time I exert my rights I am showing my Godlikeness; I am showing my justice.

But suppose there's another way to be like God. Suppose that, when all is said and done, the *only* way really to be a free son of the King is by having the King *give* us this freedom and *give* us this sonship through His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This Son, you will remember from the Epistle of the day, was God Himself — He gave up His rights and became the humble, obedient, suffering Servant all the way to the cross and grave. He was the one, remember, who, though He was the Creator of life, relinquished for us creatures His very right to live! "No one takes My life," He once said. "I lay it down of My own accord for My sheep." What a way to relinquish one's rights!

You see, Christianity is based on the proposition that God shows Himself most clearly *not* in His being somebody, *not* in His strength, *not* in His hanging onto His divine right of absolute justice. Christianity says that God shows Himself most clearly in His weakness . . . when His hands are pinned to a cross and He won't do anything about it! . . . having given up the right of doing anything about it! Christianity says that because God gave up His rights through Jesus Christ, people become sons of the King as God's own free gift.

And if this is all true — and we shout and

sing as a Christian congregation, "This is all true!" — then we do not have to hang onto our rights anymore. If God calls and makes you His free sons, where is the need for clinging to your rights? Indeed, if God on account of His goodness and love makes of us His own free sons, then the need for demonstrating that we are sons in order to be sons is completely gone. That kind of life belongs to the poor Pharisees! Our life from God is a gift, not an accomplishment. Then, finally, the church can function like a church. It can individually and corporately set aside its rights for those who eat idol meat and for those who don't; for people who pay their church dues and for those who don't; for people who have no right to make a claim on our love but who nevertheless do. That is what the weak God does. That is what the suffering God does.

You and I have tasted the goodness of this God in Christ, who makes free sons freely. And we know that once we have received such mercy, the need for hanging onto our rights — for refusing, let's say, to "pay the temple tax" — goes away. We operate with God's own great weakness and God's own good mercy instead of His fearful strength and justice. And behold: the church is church . . . freed by her Lord to be weak like Him that others might gain real strength; freed by her Lord to be nothing as He was nothing so that His world might really become something.

MACK GOEGLIN

Valparaiso, Indiana