

Proper 26A 2014 Sermon

The idea for this sermon came from a commentary by David Lose's blog, "Dear Working Preacher" in 2011, and draws heavily from that commentary.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. **2** He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. **3** He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. **4** Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. **5** Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. **6** Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

1 Thess. 2:13

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a **human word** but as what it really is, **God's word**, which is also at work in you believers.

My friends, let me suggest that this is one of the primary reasons we gather together each Sunday: to remind ourselves of the difference between what is "human word" and what is God's word. For there is a big difference, and it makes things much easier if we admit that up front. Living out of that space called "human word" and living out of that space called "God's word" are two very different ways of living. And what we as Christians strive for is to live as much as we can from that interior soul-space which our Epistle calls "God's word, which is... at work in you believers." Paul wants us to let God's word be at work in us, and to live from that source.

But if you are like me, the vast majority of the time "a *human* word is at work in us." What does that mean? Perhaps the easiest answer for us Christians is to say that a human word is at work within and among us whenever our words, actions, relationships, and attitudes are **not** reflecting the life and teaching of Jesus. Violence and wars, for instance, are the result of the human word at work in us; as are jealousy, hatred, greed, and speaking evil of others. The list could go on. But I would like to focus today on just one "human word" which is very prevalent in our society: the human word which says, "I am profoundly empty and lacking in my life, and the things of **this** world are what will fill my emptiness." This "human word" sees the world in terms of scarcity, and living out of the *space* of this human word means that our life seems constantly empty and lacking, and needs to be filled from this same human word that defined the problem to begin with. It is an existence driven by the words, "If only..." If only I would win the Power Ball lottery, all my problems would be solved. If only my spouse, or my children or parents or boss or priest were -- in this or that way -- *different* from the way they **are**, my life would be infinitely better. If only I had more time, or more energy, or didn't have this or that physical ailment.

My friends, this sense of lack and emptiness creates an ache and longing deep within us, hiding under the surface of our conscious awareness. Living out of that space called "human word", we have developed all sorts of ways of dealing with this deep, unconscious longing and emptiness. We might try to fill up the emptiness by *purchasing* things we think might bring us enjoyment,

or by eating comfort food, or going on the newest diet, entertaining ourselves with television or some other diversion, turning to sex, drugs or alcohol. Advertisers have become experts in telling us in all sorts of ways that this or that product, entertainment, food or drink or even prescription drug is the answer to our longing and emptiness. (Not that any of these things is bad in its proper place and context, of course!) Facebook and other social media companies tell us that their services are free, but they and countless other companies constantly monitor our habits and purchases and web-surfing activity and sell all that information to other companies eager to target their advertising to us. All meant to convince us that this or that product or entertainment or activity will fill the deep emptiness and longing within. This marketing juggernaut is so ubiquitous that we often aren't even aware of this "human word" bombarding us everywhere we look. "You aren't enough," this human word tells us, "and **we** have the answer to your lack, your emptiness, your soul's deep longing."

Professor David Lose writes: "Consumer spending now accounts for nearly 70 percent of our gross domestic product (GDP), which is significantly higher than most other industrialized nations (European countries average closer to 50 percent) as well as what it was during our parents' era (when it was closer to 60 percent)... And to make that all work we are encouraged at every turn to *want*. To want *more* stuff, to want *nicer* stuff, to want *lots* of stuff." (Dear Working Preacher, 2011) This, my friends, is a prime example of what St. Paul calls "a human word".

"...No wonder so many people are unhappy," Dr. Lose continues. "We are consumed by what we lack instead of grateful for our abundance. We are driven to get 'more' instead of content to celebrate 'enough.' And we measure ourselves against our deficits instead of glorying in our gifts and blessings."

We see this human word, this "if only" phenomenon, in our groups and organizations, also. I know **I** am guilty of this attitude when it comes to our parish. "If only we had more members to fill the pews! If only we had more volunteers to teach Sunday School, or take communion to shut-ins, or help with Altar Guild or funeral receptions or this or that committee, my life and our church would be so much better." But that attitude comes from a human word which measures deficits instead of glorying in our gifts and blessings.

Breaking into this preoccupation with scarcity and anxiety comes God's word in Psalm 23: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." I **shall not want**. Why not? If you read Psalm 23 attentively, you will see that, at every turn, the psalmist is telling us that God provides everything we *truly* need in this life. The psalm does not lament human scarcity; it extols God's abundant provision: green pastures, still waters, paths of righteousness, God's presence even in the valley of the shadow of death, a table prepared for us even in the presence of our enemies, our head anointed, our cup running over – and the steadfast assurance that goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. As opposed to the human word "there is never enough," this Psalm is God's word, a word of confident gratitude which says, "I trust that God will provide enough."

So, tell me: From which space inside us do we want to live? From the human word of emptiness and lack, or from God's word of provision and enough? My friends, I don't have to

tell you that there is a world of difference: the difference between a life of perpetual anxiety and dissatisfaction and a life of gratitude and fulfillment. Over 1500 years ago, St. Augustine wrote, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” If anything, that statement is even *more* true **today** than it was in the 4th Century: our hearts **are** restless, empty, and anxious -- NOT until they have won the lottery or we purchase this new weight-loss product or our spouse or children or parents or boss or priest changes, but until our hearts find their rest in God, filled with gratitude, not want.

As we celebrate All Saints’ Day, it might be good to listen to the words of 18th-Century Anglican mystic William Law, who wrote: “Who is the greatest saint in the world? It is not he who prays most or fasts most; it is not he who gives most alms, or is most eminent for temperance, chastity, or justice; but it is he who is always thankful to God, who wills everything that God wills, who receives everything as an instance of God’s goodness, and has a heart always ready to praise God for it.” Contemporary author Jerry Walls says something similar when he writes: “In our age, as in every age, people are longing for happiness, not realizing that what they are looking for is holiness.” (quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 39, no. 8.) We are looking to fill our emptiness with a human word, while in reality it can only be filled with God’s word. To live out of God’s word is quite simply what it means to be a saint.

I’d like to invite you to engage in a simple exercise this coming week – an exercise suggested by David Lose. “Take just five minutes at some point during the week and write down in one column of a sheet of paper the ten things for which you are most grateful in your life. In the other column, write down the ten things you most want right now. Once the two columns are complete, consider this question: Which would have a greater impact, losing all the things for which you are grateful or gaining all the things you currently want? Then take a few minutes to email me your insights.

“This kind of exercise,” says Professor Lose, “can give us much needed practice in recognizing God’s generosity, to nudge us from mindsets of nervous scarcity [human word] to confident abundance [God’s word], and to invite us to rise above a culture shaped by its incessant wanting and transform us instead into communities marked by our trust in God’s blessing.” (Lose, *ibid.*)

And as a daily reminder, carry with you in your pocket or purse the coin you were given as you arrived, marked with the words, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

Professor Lose concludes: “I think that you will quickly discover that Psalm 23, used in *this* way, soon becomes a protest against all the voices [the human words] that seek to rob us of our confidence in God’s providence and identify us by what we’re not. It becomes a solid declaration that we are those people who have been richly blessed and so can lead lives of confidence, courage, and generosity, knowing that we have, indeed, been blessed to **be** a blessing.” (Lose, *ibid.*)

AMEN