

LECTIONARY HOMILETICS

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INSTRUCTIONS: THEOLOGICAL THEMES

CONTENT

- 1) You have been invited to participate because of your special background in theology. Basically, you are to write on what the lesson says about God, salvation, the church, the world, etc., and to expand upon the theological themes in the text. You might want to summarize how the lesson has informed Christian doctrine and tradition. Another section will deal with the pastoral implications (doctrine of humankind) of the lesson, so you do *not* need to write on that. Please do *not* include exegesis, summaries or outlines of the biblical text in your article. We are looking for new information that will help in illuminating the text.
- 2) You are asked to concentrate on one of the four lessons (the "featured text"). It may be helpful to draw connections and parallels (if possible) between the gospel lesson(s) and the non-gospel lessons.
- 3) Although there will be a homiletical section, please share analogies, stories, illustrations and ways you might want to preach the lesson (though your main purpose is theological material). The majority of readers are preachers preparing sermons. Use this as an opportunity to instruct the readers about recent movements/approaches in theology.
- 4) You may want to use the other lectionary readings for the day as hermeneutical resources.
- 5) Remember that you are writing to an **ecumenical** audience. You may certainly reference movements within particular traditions, but be aware that your readership is broad-ranging.
- 6) Please use your unique background; however, avoid professional jargon. Draw on your knowledge of recent trends in scholarship, but make it accessible to the pastor in the pulpit.
- 7) Keep in mind the **liturgical season**.
- 8) Provide **proper documentation** for your sources (author, publisher, year, etc.). Do not submit copyrighted material; when quoting another source, be careful not to quote more than fifty words from any particular source. However, this "fifty-word rule" does not apply to smaller works (such as poems). In that case, only quote a *relatively small portion*. Also remember that *hymns are copyrighted*; quoting verses of hymns requires us to pay the copyright holder (which we are willing to do if a really good point is being made). Be *particularly careful* to provide full URLs (website addresses) when referring to online material.
- 9) Be parsimonious in your use of footnotes and quotations. Readers are interested in your thoughts and analysis.
- 10) Try to use language that reflects the value of all persons. Avoid the awkward constructions him/her, he/she, etc. Instead, consider using single gender examples or illustrations from real life, which include a multi-gendered presentation. If you are using a "clinical example," please use a fictitious name.
- 11) Use active verbs whenever you can. Active verbs energize the reader and the listener.
- 12) Do not begin sentences with "And" and rarely begin a sentence with "But."
- 13) Use complete sentences (subject + verb).
- 14) Essay length: 800 to 1000 words.

FORMAT

- 1) Please send your essays on diskette along with a hard copy, or send as an e-mail attachment. If you cannot send an electronic version, your essays will be scanned which requires a **quality, double-spaced** hard (paper) copy.
- 2) The preferred word processing program is *MSWord* although *WordPerfect* is acceptable.
- 3) Page numbering can be used but do not use headers or footers.
- 4) Use an em-dash — not double hyphens — for emphasis. No space between words and—dash (In *Word* the em-dash is Ctrl [key] + Alt [key] + - [minus sign on numeric keypad]).
- 5) Italicize the titles of books, plays, magazines, etc. Do not underline. Songs, poems, and articles take quotation marks.
- 6) Use **one** space after a period, question mark, and colon.
- 7) Quotation marks go **after** punctuation at the end of a sentence, but inverted commas (single quotation marks) go **before** punctuation. "For instance, when 'quoting within a quote'." In notes and between parentheses, use brief abbreviations for books of the Bible with no periods. Example: Mk 2:1-17. In the text of your essay, spell out books of the Bible.
- 8) Use the following format for citing verses within parentheses. For a single verse: v. 18. For multiple verses: vv. 5-11.
- 9) Place all notes at end of each essay and *not* at the bottom of each page. Follow the basic format of these examples for books, plays, and magazines. Note p. for one page and pp. for multiple pages.

NOTES

1. Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 45.
2. Thomas War, "Openness to All," *Weavings*, Vol. XI, No. 4, pp. 21-25.

Please contact the office if you have any further questions.

SAMPLE ESSAY #1

This piece originally appeared in the May 2002 issue of *Lectionary Homiletics* (May 5, 2002: Sixth Sunday of Easter, p. 2).

Theological Themes

John 14:15-21

The gospel reading for this week admits of several interpretations, and the controversy surrounding those interpretations has bedeviled the church—Protestant believers, especially—for several centuries now. Verse 21, quoting Jesus, reads: “He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him” (*NASB*). The verse suggests that God’s love depends upon the individual keeping the commandments of Jesus, and the obvious corollary is that anyone who refuses to keep the commandments would be denied the love of God.

A sixteenth-century movement known as Arminianism, named for Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius, seized upon verses like this to insist that human volition was the key to the salvation process. Arguing against the Calvinist notion of predestination—that God had elected some for salvation, regardless of merit—the Arminians held that the individual need not be passive in the scheme of salvation...that she could, in fact, initiate the salvation process.

In American history the Calvinist interpretation of salvation prevailed, more or less, until the turn of the nineteenth century. A series of revivals, known collectively to historians as the Second Great Awakening, convulsed the new nation in New England, the Cumberland Valley of Kentucky, and western New York. The primary apologist for Arminianism was Charles Grandison Finney, who instituted a series of “new measures” to promote

revival. Among his contributions to American religious history was the “mourner’s bench” or the “anxious bench,” where those who had heard the sermon could come forward and deliberate the state of their souls, to decide whether or not to accept the offer of salvation. Among a people who had only recently taken their *political* destiny into their own hands, Finney’s assurances that they controlled their *spiritual* destinies as well proved enormously attractive; to this day Billy Graham concludes his sermons by enjoining his auditors to “make a decision for Christ,” language fully in keeping with an Arminian understanding of salvation.

Calvinist theologians, such as those gathered at the Reformed Synod of Dort in 1618, countered that Arminianism was a kind of theological recidivism, a throwback to the “works-righteousness” of medieval Catholicism. God saves individuals regardless of merit, the Calvinists asserted; there is nothing we can do to earn the grace of God.

The Calvinist scheme seems foreign to us in the twenty-first century because it takes matters out of our hands and entrusts our salvation to God alone. Especially in America, where we nurture the illusion of self-determination, Calvinism seems restrictive and confining, the very antithesis of freedom.

It’s easy to be seduced by this logic, but if we depend on our own works or merit for salvation—keeping the commandments—that leaves little room for grace. It also leaves precious little margin for error, for if our efforts fall short, if we fail to keep the commandments, then our souls are in peril.

Martin Luther and the other reformers saw it differently. No matter how hard he tried to keep the commandments and live by the precepts of the biblical law, Luther could not escape a sense of his own unworthiness before God, his own insouciance.

His duties as an Augustinian monk, his frequent confessions, and his attendance at the sacraments could not convince him that he had done enough to earn salvation. (One exasperated confessor told Luther to go out and commit some sin worthy of confession before returning to the confessional!) Luther’s breakthrough came when a spiritual adviser counseled him to read Paul’s epistles to the Romans and the Galatians. There he found that God’s grace came to the individual regardless of merit, and this “re-discovery of the gospel” relieved him of responsibility for his own spiritual destiny. Luther, in short, did not want his eternal destiny dependent upon his own actions; he was content to entrust his soul to God.

The argument between Calvinists and Arminians, however, cuts both ways. If the Arminian scheme placed too much confidence in human ability and too much responsibility on the believer, Calvinism offered an attenuated and highly limited view of grace, the conviction that God saved only the elect. Verse 18 appears to belie this claim: “I will not leave you as orphans,” Jesus promises. “I will come to you” (*NASB*).

Grace indeed.

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SAMPLE ESSAY #2

This piece originally appeared in the
August-September 2004 issue of *Lectionary Homiletics*
(September 26, 2002: Twenty-Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time, p. 76).

Theological Themes

1 Timothy 6:6-19

1 Timothy calls for a shift away from the things that destroy individuals, friendships, families, and communities—conceit, envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, wrangling, and what the writer describes as a “morbid craving for controversy and disputes about words” (1 Tim 6:4). Instead, we are called to keep the first commandment and pursue “righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness” (v. 11). The passage goes on, however, to focus on the love of money. Yet it does not completely reject the rich. They are told not to be haughty, to focus on how God provides for all things, and to be generous and do good with their wealth—in order to “take hold of the life that really is life” (v. 19).

These themes are echoed through the New Testament. In speaking about what happens in our baptism, Paul relates a Stoic philosophical distinction (between egocentric preoccupations and a larger conception of the good) to a Jewish apocalyptic distinction (between an old and a new age that God is ushering in). Drawing on lists of vices and virtues found in ancient philosophical schools, he describes a shift away from being fixated strictly on egocentric and prudential preoccupations (and therefore on things that destroy personal and corporate life) to setting one’s mind on Christ (and therefore on the “fruit” of his Spirit—love, joy, patience, goodness, kindness, meekness, and self-control). This shift is what lies at the heart of our baptism into Christ’s death—our death to our false self’s preoccupations—and resurrection into the abundant life of his Spirit. In baptism, we die to the classic boundaries that divide us into factions and hierarchies—distinctions between men and women, slaves and free persons, Jews and Greeks, what is lawful

and unlawful—and enter into the new corporate reality of Christ’s “mind” and “body”.

The gospel writers describe the reign of God that Jesus preached in relation to the new apocalyptic age ushered in by God’s reign. As Jesus healed the sick and forgave sinners, he called people to “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Mt 6:33). This call was nothing other than the call, at the heart of Jewish faith, to obey the first commandment—“love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”—and its corollary: “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37, 39).

This call is also at the heart of all great Christian theology. Augustine spoke about loving others—and one’s self—for God’s sake and not for any other reason. Luther spoke about the intrinsic relationship between faith and God—that whatever we put our faith in is our God. Tillich used the language of “ultimate concern” to understand the first commandment as something that pertains to what is of unconditional significance, independent of any conditions of character, desire, or circumstance. H. R. Niebuhr spoke about our ultimate center of value. The root of all sin within Christianity is fundamentally a theological and not an ethical issue—although ethical issues cannot be divorced from the theological. We can only properly love ourselves, other people, or even the creaturely world, if that love is ultimately defined in relation to God’s love for us and the rest of the world.

But why is such emphasis placed on the dangers of wealth? In the story of the rich young ruler, Jesus tells the young man who comes to be his disciple to “go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor”; after this, he asserts that “it will be hard for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mk 10:21, 23). There is no denying that wealth, which provides for our basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter, is one of the ultimate tests of our loyalty to Jesus and God’s reign. It can so easily become an ultimate criterion for us. In our consumerist society, these passages

about wealth stand out as prophetic indictments against what probably is the major idolatry of our time. We will not make ourselves popular if we speak out against this idolatry; indeed, we ourselves may prefer to ignore the poignancy of this central New Testament teaching.

Yet, it is also the case that wealth in and of itself is not evil. Throughout the scriptures, there is a place for the proper use of wealth. The good wife in Proverbs 31 is praised for her entrepreneurial skills. Throughout the royal psalms, the wise king is also a wealthy king who uses his power and resources to secure justice and defend the rights of the poor. Throughout the wisdom literature, the wise person tends also to be wealthy, even though that wealth is gained justly and is used to help the poor. Of course, the overarching attitude toward wealth in the New Testament, especially in Jesus’ teaching, tends to be negative—warnings abound about its corrupting influence—yet examples are also given of wealthy men and women who use their money in the service of the kingdom of God.

In sum, Christian theological teaching on wealth is as unambiguous as it is nuanced. We are to set our mind on God’s rule in the world—and its justice and mercy—above all else. That means that the pursuit of money (and all that tends to accompany it, i.e., status, fame, approval) cannot be our ultimate pursuit. Wealth in and of itself can be an especially corrupting pursuit. Nonetheless, this does not mean that wealth is evil. It simply means that it is something we use for God’s purposes; we are not to become its servants. In our baptism into Christ’s life, we are given the power to live as free people defined neither by wealth nor by poverty. In Paul’s words, “all things are yours...the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God” (1 Cor 3:22-23).

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