

When God's Good Gifts are Defiled: The Sinner and The Sinned Against

Presented at Cranach Institute Conference
August 2006

I'm delighted and admittedly somewhat unnerved to be with you this morning. When one of my colleagues learned that a mere Christian psychologist was going to speak about sin and sexuality on a Lutheran seminary campus he elevated his eyebrows and said, "Freudian death wish, huh?" He wanted to know if I was to be regarded as an expert in the area of sin, sex or being sinned against. Trust me when I tell you that "Sexual Sin Expert" is not going to look good on my letterhead. Then of course, just last century, Dr. Ruth seemed to do reasonably well for herself. For the record, I don't pretend to be an expert in the area of sexuality, sin, or being sinned against. I'm just not a Ph. Deity like Dr. Phil, but I am eager to offer for your consideration what it is that my clients have taught me in the last several decades. I warned the conference coordinators that I am not a theologian. I'm surely not an exegete. I told them that they didn't want a clinical psychologist. Yet, when they mentioned that I could speak with you about sin – then, I was easily persuaded, for my professional vocation is steeped in sin. Lest anyone misunderstand: my professional vocation is steeped in the sin of *other* people.

I've counseled hundreds and hundreds of people and every single one among them was a sinner, or was sinned against. A goodly number managed to suffer both misfortunes. These Christian souls have taught me that defilement is no mere, niggling annoyance. I have watched as defilement has sucked the life, hope, trust and faith from many of its victims. Defilement leaves in its wake only the debris of Satan's mischief and merry making. I've become passionate about defilement in the last years as I've seen the personal and spiritual wreckage of my clients' lives scattered about me. Some might say, "Lighten, up. Sin happens." I've come to believe that we can no longer sit back, wag our heads sadly and thumb-twiddle when it comes to the well-being of God's baptized children who remain captive to wounds of sin, particularly those who have been sinned against.

This is a gathering of very passionate people -- much like Lynne Truss. Are you familiar with the wonderful little book, [Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation?](#) (There is a picture of a Panda on the Cover) You must read if you've not seen it. In her book she offers a single minded, unapologetic call to arms for the tiny minority of British people who love punctuation...and in her words...don't like to see it mucked about with." She notes with great consternation, and I quote, "that most people don't know their apostrophe from their elbow and if they persist in their ignorance and in their indifference they deserve to be struck by lightning, hacked up on the spot and buried in an unmarked grave."

Some of you may recall the engaging little book written by British author, Lynne Truss. A woman, fanatical about the appalling misuse of punctuation, she wrote the book, "Eats, Shoots and Leaves." (The cover pictures a panda eating eucalyptus leaves.) It is "The

Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation. In her book she offers a single minded, unapologetic call to arms for the tiny minority of British people who love punctuation...and in her words...don't like to see it mucked about with." She notes with great consternation, and I quote, "that most people don't know their apostrophe from their elbow and if they persist in their ignorance and in their indifference they deserve to be struck by lightning, hacked up on the spot and buried in an unmarked grave. Contradictions are just rubbish." Would it were that the majority of Christians in our culture were as passionate about the right knowledge and use of God's Divine design for sexuality as Ms. Truss is passionate about mere punctuation.

I have a clear bias as I speak with you this morning. I'm particularly passionate about serving the sinned against soul. The soul defiled by the sin of another; the soul that did not choose to sin. The soul that has marinated in the pain inflicted by another; often another whom one has loved.

This morning we will examine our culture's wild indifference to God's vision for sexuality. I'll offer you a clear characterization of what it means to be a soul who is sinned against. Then, I'll profile the particular spiritual hazards that exist for those of us who would endeavor to respond to the puzzle pieces of defilement, whether we are called and ordained servants, psychotherapists, or family members. Finally, I'll point to what I believe are compassionate and merciful responses essential for help, healing and renewal of the sinned against.

CULTURE

Our culture is a decision-making, happening kind of place where the winners are those who seek and find satisfaction on their own terms. Our culture has rules for determining just who are the winners and losers and how the game of life shall be played. (Our God also has rules, but these days, the culture seems markedly less interested in God's rules.) Our culture has long ago determined that the process of voting will determine what is right and what is wrong: very democratic. For example, our culture uses the votes of key astronomers to determine what planets can remain in the solar system. We just lost Pluto: too bad, so sad.

Other votes are more alarming. In 1973, a committee of the American Psychiatric Association met behind closed doors and voted to remove homosexuality as a mental disorder from the APA Bible, The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. This text is the handbook used most often in diagnosing [mental disorders](#) in the [United States](#). Since 1952 the medical and scientific community had listed homosexuality among the sociopathic personality disturbances. In 1968, we started voting and decided homosexuality was not really sociopathic behavior, that it was really a sexual deviation. The in 1973 homosexuality was removed from the list of illnesses and was no longer considered by the medical community to be pathological. Defilement became a societally sanctioned behavior.

What of the vision of Christian marriage and Christian sexuality? What of the legacy given us by our fathers and forefathers? Stephen King, of all people, explains that the

boomers have failed to do great things and think big thoughts, he writes, “I don’t want to speak too despairingly of my generation. Actually I do, we had a chance to change the world and we opted for the Home Shopping Network, instead.” Our culture’s vision of God’s Word and will regarding Christian sexuality has become a twisted, narcissistic nightmare. Many this week have set the culture scene with clarity. In brief: We live in a world where moral atrocities multiply faster than bunnies in a box. Christian morality is regarded as an embarrassment. It is just so last century. We worship autonomy, control, personal right and power. The only real sins that cause alarm in the public square are homophobia and wearing animal fur. We’ve voted to maintain our freedoms – including our freedom to live prodigal lives before our God.

A brief statistical romp through polls reveals the full palate sexual sin

80% of individuals between 12 and 20 approved of premarital sex in 2003. In the 1950s only 12% approved.

84% of single women with a college education agreed that, “it is common these days for people my age to have sex just for fun and not expect any commitment beyond the encounter itself.”

In 2003, 34.6 percent of babies were born to unmarried women.

A whopping 88% of teens who take abstinence pledges have sexual intercourse before marriage. – Although pledged teens tend to wait about 18 months longer than their peers before taking the plunge

41% of 15 year olds have hooked up; 14% of 7th and 8th graders have already begun to engage in casual sexual interactions routinely.

In the summer 2004 issue of Brides magazine, only 6% of readers polled responded that they had not yet had sex with their fiancé.

There is a national college campus organization named the Bi-Sexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender and Supporters’ Alliance.

26 licensed brothels exist in the state of Nevada, one owned and operated by for Hollywood Madam Heidi Fleiss is the first legal brothel serving legal customers.

Civil rights activists, pleased with progress on gay marriage have announced that “polygamy rights is the next civil rights battle

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that we have really adopted Nike’s ad slogan as our own cultural mantra for sexual behavior: “Just do it.” Our culture has come to believe that purity is about organic foods, vegetarian health spas, in-room herbal detox baths and fat flush programs. We have lost our sense of the holy; we have, indeed lost our way.

Who can begin to calibrate the damage in time as well as in eternity? Dominoes of defilement are falling in all directions throughout our culture. Worse, the souls in the midst of the fray are not the least bit alarmed. We're told no one is being hurt. We're assured that sexual repression is just so last century. Everywhere we look, God's holy design for sexuality is being splattered like a bug on a windshield. Something precious, something never fully comprehended is being lost, squandered and lives are being defiled. And people are being sinned against.

Loving Christian parents are heartbroken as they learn that their young adult son or daughter prefers an alternative life style. Parents are overwrought. They fear they've failed their children. They grieve their child's loss of a spiritual compass and wonder if their child will chose to disavow his or her practice of the faith.. Parents suffer silently what is really fourth commandment abuse wrapped in sixth commandment atrocities.

What of the wild sexual frenzy of partner less youth? Christian men and women who will one day become the spouse of these recreational sex offenders have had their marriage bed defiled without their consent, often without their knowledge, they have been sinned against, as well.

Lest we imagine that defilement exists only among the single, let me be swift to acknowledge that on a routine basis marriages are betrayed, holy vows are abandoned, God's vision for Christian marriage is shattered in reckless exhibits of extra-marital hormonal excess, abandonment or abuse, and marriages are dissolved when they become inconvenient.

For centuries, the Christian church has been galvanized to bring the saving truth of Jesus Christ to those who have sinned against God and to those who have sinned against their neighbor so that they might revel in forgiveness. One pastor told me, "that's what we do in the church, our job is to forgive sinners." And we should. And we do. Have you sinned?

Boy have we got the religion for you. As a matter of fact, have we got the God for you. God, the Holy Trinity, to be exact. God the Father, Creator. God the Son, Redeemer, God the Spirit, Sanctifier. That's the God you need if you have sinned. Luther, in a pastoral letter comments, "God is not the kind of father who casts off sick and erring children; if he were, he would have no children."

Been unfaithful? God can forgive that. Euthanized your marriage during a tough stretch of life? God can forgive that, too. God can, does and has always promised to forgive the sins of His repentant children, forever drawing them back to Himself, drowning the Old Adam in the very real power of baptismal grace and burying their sins in Christ's own tomb where they will remain for all eternity.

Wow. What a great God for sinners. To put it bluntly and in the vernacular, the most Holy God Rocks. Rock of Ages, so to speak.

Indeed. On a certain Friday afternoon, on a very certain Hill, it pleased our most holy God to redeem mankind. So as the blue sky was swallowed in black to blot out the horror of it all, God the Father laid upon His only Son, Jesus Christ, every egregious sin that has or will ever be committed by the wayward children He loves. On that very Good Friday afternoon, even through the penetrating blackness of noon sky, we are privileged to see into the very heart of God, and we see the depth of His love for his prodigal children – for we see His Son hanging on the cross. One lamb slaughtered, whose blood would purchase every soul for all eternity.

And with the stunning resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Word of God's triumph shocks and comforts all at once. Easter morning has forever come to be celebrated by sinners throughout all Christendom for centuries upon centuries. It is the sinners' grand festival of awe and thanksgiving. Why? I'm pretty certain that it's not about the chocolate rabbits and Easter lily fumes. It is, instead, because in the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ, our God masterfully, conquered sin and death for all time and won the forgiveness of sins, giving life and salvation for all who believe in Him. Satan is done in; a forever condemned angelic/megalomaniac loser. All in a day's work and sacrifice for the Omnipotent God of the Universe.

By the grace of God, repentant sinners find rescue, remedy, and comfort and are invited to take possession of Life giving eternal promises given them by God Himself. Sinners rejoice! And in response to that astonishing display of Divine love, what is it that this God asks of us? What is our duty? That we thank, praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true. Sinners need not live in the squalor of their fear and misery. Sinners need not suffer silently. Sinners need not find their own way out of their pain, anger and helplessness.

That particular curse seems to be reserved for another group of people. A group of people whom I have called "the sinned against." The sinned against often seem to live on a scruffy parcel of emotional and spiritual landscape that is often undetected or neglected by the church. To twist a time honored bit of wisdom: all the king's horses and all the king's men don't seem to notice the sinned against kin. (You won't find that in your NT concordance or in Luther.) Some theologians have suggested that we may not really have noticed the plight of the sinned against.

More pointedly, others have come to believe that theologians and parish pastors alike may have abdicated their role in ministering to the victims of sin. A prominent voice speaking on this matter is Andrew Park, a professor of Theology at United Theological Seminary in Ohio and an ordained United Methodist minister. His 2004 text entitled, *From Hurt to Healing: The Theology of the Wounded* examines what he calls woundedness that exists on the "other side of sin." Park writes, "For the past two thousand years, we have inadequately treated the victims of sin by neglecting to formulate doctrines for them. It is time for the church to think about a salvific path for the sinned-against. To do so, we need to understand the pain of the wounded, listening to their agonies." Park writes, "we have taught a brilliantly insightful, decidedly orthodox

understanding of original sin. We are resigned to the perpetual presence of the ghastly twins born of original sin: evil and suffering.”

Park would have us understand that an unexpected outcome of our theology is that we are accustomed to explaining evil eloquently and theologically. We are less accustomed to responding to evil inflicted on another soul. In fact, he claims, “traditional Christian understandings of sin have all but unilaterally focused on the sinner.” I’m certain that much of Park’s theology won’t agree with you, yet I believe that as Christians we will want to accept Park’s challenge to answer the penetrating question, “How does the church take on the issue of deliverance of the sinned against from their pain and suffering?” We had better be able to know to do and to teach precisely this sort of caring. How do we bring mercy, compassion and effective spiritual care to those on the other side of sin?

I, for one, don’t agree that we have neglected the victims of sin, but I would suggest that we have not done nearly as much as we might to bring Light, Life and holy consolation into the lives of these people whose suffering is real often chronic as well as intensely private.

Let’s talk about victims, shall we? A primary distinction is important, as there are real victims and then there are the pretenders, the wannabes, and the sympathy soaker-uppers. Ordinarily we have a high regard for real victims. We live in a culture saturated with victims. There are victims of hunger, poverty, crime, tsunamis, tropical storms, hurricanes and tornadoes. There is an unending tidal wave of misery that we can watch unfold on the news 24/7. We have deep compassion for these individuals whose safety nets and normal lives have been torn away beneath them. We are eager to assist people caught up in the public drama of tragedy and despair.

We are affronted and downright exasperated, though, with what one author, Sykes, has now called a nation of victims: whiney, irresponsible people who claim victim status. These are the people who blame everyone else for the misfortune in their lives; those who turn everyday difficulties into disabilities if not certifiable psychological problems. These are the people who are perpetually offended, often theatrical personalities soooo wounded that they are entitled to bad mouth the other, skip efforts towards reconciliation and are prepared to organize a well groomed lynching party to assassinate the character of anyone who crosses them. We regard these people with derision, we disregard their chorus of complaint. These people give all “victims” a bad reputation.

Let me offer two quick case studies of victims who have been sinned against. The first illustration is a 40 something woman who had been battered weekly by her husband of ten years. She decided to leave her abusive husband the day he picked up their one year old child and threw him across the room. She had tolerated his beating in order to keep the family together. She left the family home and went to a shelter. She was deeply ashamed and told no one in her family what had happened. She began divorce proceedings. Shortly thereafter, her husband went to her workplace, shot and killed her with a semi-automatic weapon. Her priest refused to say a funeral mass for her because

she had abandoned the marriage and was seeking a divorce. Her family was left bereft of pastoral support, believing that God had punished her for her sin of leaving her abuser. No pretender victim here.

The second profile is of woman who was married to a LC-MS pastor, let's call her Louise. I use her story with her permission. She asked me out to lunch during at a national conference where I was speaking about depression. She said she just had to talk to someone, but needed to talk privately. Louise told me that everyone believed that she and her husband were the perfect couple. She said they had a model marriage. When I asked why she would be seeking counsel from me she replied that they had a *model* marriage, "a small, cheap imitation of the real thing." Louise explained to me, barely containing her rage and tears that her husband had confessed to her that was gay. After almost 15 years of marriage she had never known about it. He usually explained his many absences from the family by pointing to his devotion to his sheep, long evening meetings at church, extended parishioner visits, and many hospital vigils. He had lied to her about nearly everything for over a decade of marriage. When she asked her husband why he was telling her now, she assumed that he was seeking a divorce. Her husband's next revelation was more shocking than the first: he had contracted AIDS, he was very, very ill and he thought she might also be infected with the virus. He didn't want a divorce, he wanted her silence, he wanted her to stand by his side. His doctor told him that he was dying. No one was to know that he was gay or that he had AIDS. She knew that if the Elders or the District President became aware of his diagnosis and his sexual sin he would lose his Call, his paycheck and they would lose their home in the parsonage.

She had no pastor to talk to. Her husband was her pastor. She was terrified that she would contract the disease, or that one of her children would contract the disease. She didn't dare talk to the circuit counselor and there was no one she trusted from whom to seek counsel or comfort. An emotional tsunami, had just roared through her life, tearing away from her everything she had ever believed she possesses: safety, love, hope, future, trust, intimacy. Gone, in a moment. She suffered silently, constantly fearing discovery, rather than bear the humiliation and ruination that she believed would result from seeking help. She lived in a state of frenzy, shame and despair, hating her husband from that day until the very day he died. The church mourned their pastor's death. Lots of flowers. Lots of memorials. What a great guy. He had told his parish that was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease.

The woman, now in her 70s, told me that she had never spoken her story to anyone before. Her husband died almost 30 years ago. She has forever been shackled to deception, lies and unhappiness, maintaining a Normal Rockwell myth about her wonderful husband, whom everyone loved. She has forfeited personal comfort, fellowship and the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren for decades. To this day she has not told her children the truth. She wept openly when she told me, "only God's grace sustained me." At the close of our lunch, she said, "I had to tell someone before I died." I asked, "why me?" Her response was deeply moving, "you know what suffering means; knowing about suffering matters."

I remember thinking, maybe what the church needs are itinerant psychologists speaking at national conferences with which anguished hearts can do lunch and unburden their souls.

I believe that Louise was right about suffering. When one is suffering and requires meaningful assistance, it is nearly impossible to imagine parachuting into the life of someone who has known no tribulation. Or worse, one will not seek help in the community of a church that doesn't understand suffering. Some churches would have us believe that church is an upbeat place for happy people because God has promised to be with his people, thereby insulating them from sorrow. Sometimes I fear that the new churchly culture of sing and sway music, Doctrinal McNuggets in the sermon, helium balloons in back of the altar and special machines that launch confetti during the glories – all of these things send the wrong message to people who suffer. You have no idea how many people whom I treat clinically who cannot and who will not go to church because they tell me that they “fake being happy” and “if you're not happy at my church, you'll stick out like a sore thumb.” Knowing about suffering matters.

One would think that the church and her clergy should be remarkably familiar with victimization and suffering. The experience of being victimized by sin is many storied and as old as Genesis. The centuries of life cataloged by the children of God are textured with sin, victimization and suffering of every sort. We are compelled to note that the very Son of God hanging naked and dying on a noon day cross, with the sins of the world laid upon His own body is the most universally moving episode of what it means to be sinned against and to suffer.

Luther's letters and sermons are rich with the promise and certainty of suffering for those who would follow Christ. In His 1530 sermon “On Cross and Suffering” he preaches, “Every Christian must be aware that suffering will not fail to come.” This, I assure you is a well kept secret in quite a few churches. Luther continues, “Since we know then that it is God's good pleasure that we should suffer, and that God's glory is manifested in our suffering, better than in any other way, and since we are the kind of people who cannot hold on to the Word and our faith without suffering, and moreover since we have the noble, previous promise that the cross which God sends to us is not a bad thing, but rather an utterly precious and noble holy thing, why should we not be bold to suffer?”

I assure you that very few congregations have heard anything even remarkably close to preaching of this nature. Too bad, for when we have been taught properly about suffering we are prepared to receive spiritual care that will assist us to remain steadfast during the time of suffering and buoyed by certain hope of God sure rescue. We need to be taught that our Lord allows suffering and affliction into the lives of His children so that He can draw us closer to Himself, so that we may hold fast to Him, become entirely reliant on Him and learn to find His peace and promise in the midst of worldly tribulation.

Otherwise when suffering comes, as it surely will we feel ambushed, betrayed by God and all the more hopeless. If we have been taught that God accomplishes in us whatever

is required for our sanctification, we are confident that God will equip us throughout for the doing of His will that which is pleasing to Him. Knowing about suffering matters.

It's important to note, though, that quantifying personal pain and comparing it to the pain of others is not a particularly useful enterprise. Just how much sin can reasonably be expected to result in how much suffering? And, how much suffering ought one to be reasonably able to bear without being considered needy or worse, dependent?

Os Guinness, in his book, *Unspeakable Evil*, notes that most people suffer today under the weight of grinding evils that he calls, "numbingly ordinary." These days, one need not be the victim of spectacularly violent verbal or sexual abuse. One need not experience the heart breaking betrayal of marital infidelity. One doesn't have to be victimized as a spouse plunders the family's financial nest egg to gamble or buy sexual services. Suffering comes in all shapes and sizes, each destroying hope, marriage, and life. I invite you to talk with the man whose wife explains that she simply stopped loving him years ago, but that she lives with him "for the sake of the children." The single most frequent suffering that I observe in my clinical practice is two people living in a marriage that has died years ago; two people, benumbed, living in separate orbits from their spouse, living lives of whispered resentment and disappointment. They are enslaved to their history of hurts and recite to one another the injustices each has suffered at the hands of the other. And after years of exchanging those litanies, silence is all that they continue to share. These are people who are perpetually grieving for the marriage that might have been and have grown weary of pretending. Real pain is whatever hurts.

Yet, says Guinness, "When we experience real pain, the devastation can be so total, the senseless irrationality so complete, the impossibility of a way out so bleak, and the combined tensions of all the conflicts so unbearable, that it seems the only way out is to quit. Despair at least brings relief, for there is a certain numbness that is the reward of no longer caring." And you must know that despair may well result in falling away from the church, living a life of progressive isolation, taking a sabbatical from one's faith, and in its most dangerous incarnation, despair leads to a desire and a will to end one's own life.

How does one respond? How does one provide life transformational assistance? How does one surround another with love, reassurance and hope at a time when some are so wounded they can barely speak their pain?

The Hippocratic Oath, written some time in the 4th century B.C. seems an unlikely point of departure in response to that question. Yet, begin there we will with two clauses of particular note: First "I will keep them from harm and injustice." Second, "Whatever, in connection with my professional practice or not, in connection with whatever I see or hear, in the life of men, which ought not to be spoken of abroad, I will not divulge, as reckoning that all such should be kept secret."

The Oath was not intended to be aspirational; it was intended to guide the practice of those who were physicians. Today's physicians of the soul would be well served by honoring the same practices, assuring that those who seek their care will be kept from

harm, injustice and disclosures of any sort, to any person regarding the care and counsel they have offered. It's equally useful to observe that these recommendations to honor the integrity of the person seeking care would be as valuable to family members, and friends who would hope to offer comfort to those who have been sinned against. So many of the clients with whom I work have been betrayed by the gossip of a friend, or worse have learned that their pastor has shared a part of their story with another (in their best interests of course). As a result people do not seek care. People prefer to suffer in cocoons of isolation and hopelessness because there is no one in their world personal or professional with whom they can trust the contents of their hearts or souls.

Teach us what worship is about.

Please teach us how to worship. Teach us what it means to take possession of God's gifts of grace for us, given through His Son Jesus Christ. For once you've taught us to worship and receive Christ's gifts, we'll be darkening your office door, insisting that you offer us Compline, or a Service of Evening prayer, Matins on weekday mornings and a service of confession on Saturday nights. We'll start to ask for your prayer. We'll start to ask for God's specific blessing – for everything which God has promised to us can be bestowed in blessing -- in innumerable areas of our lives. We'll not leave you alone if you teach us what worship is about.

You must teach us about worship. For many among us have had little opportunity to learn our history or to learn our tradition. Many of us know little Biblical theology. Few of us know our liturgy, apart from its content. So without knowing these things we are likely to make all kinds of errors in our corporate efforts to respond to God's Word.

When you teach us these things, or as these things are called to our remembrance we will know, once again, who we are. We will have recovered for this generation and for the generation that follows a Lutheran identity rooted deeply in the body of the living Christ. An identity in which there is refuge, comfort and Truth. We will understand that it means something quite wonderful to be a Lutheran.

We bring to the Divine Service our very present lacerations of heart and soul. We are most keenly aware of our needs, fears, failures and anger. We bend beneath the weight of our defilement, powerlessness, helplessness, and guilt. And it is our deepest hope that we can come to worship and receive real help with real life.

Psalm 84 gives an excellent prescription for the soul: My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord: My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. My soul thirsts for you in a dry and weary land.

The Psalmist gets it. Each of us has our own dry and weary land. The geography looks a little bit different for each of us. For some it may be grieving the loss of a loved one, for others it may be unjust persecution, it may be serious needs of family, or fear in the face

of frail health. Still others rage at sins committed against them, or continue to feel helpless in the presence of some wound that remains in the heart.

Others of us may be struggling mightily: some struggling against the temptations to seek our own justice against those who have sinned against us. Others struggling in a marriage – intending to honor our marriage vows but weary with the realities of living with a person who is hard to love or who has retreated into a cave of indifference or emotional absence. Still others who have evidence of infidelity but dare not think it or speak it to anyone.

We live in a dry and weary land every day of our life and that is why we are eager to come to the Service of the Word and the Service of the Table. We need God now. We need Him desperately for this world and the next. We're not always entirely certain, though, how to take possession of the gifts of grace for comfort and sure help now, on this side of heaven.

Here many of us continue to require our preacher's sermonic help in the midst of the worship service. Why? Because precious few of us will ever have sufficient courage to darken our pastor's door and talk to you. Some of us have hurts so deep or sins so humbling we'll never ask for your help. The only hope and comfort we may ever be given, is the hope that you give us as you preach God's Holy Word. So we do need to hear from you again and again, how God through His Word makes us holy, forgives our sins and gives us new life in which we find hope.

For hope battles despair

Hope underscores the fact that God is working in us and through us and in spite of us. Hope reminds us that God is much at work – even at those times we can't detect it, even at those most difficult times when God appears to be silent.

Help us to receive in our empty hands the gifts of Christ, teach us to ask for prayer and blessing; for anything God has promised, the pastor may bestow in blessing. Teach us that it is indeed, God, from whom all help comes, and it is our God who will first open our mouths to praise and then to taste His life-sustaining grace.

A final request for our preachers in worship:

In these days we have lost a sense of awe regarding the facts of our faith. We can recite the 32 doctrines in the Apostle's Creed without batting an eye lash. When we lose awe we lose reverence.

Holy things are regarded casually, until they become regarded with indifference. We have veritably lost a sense of the holy; we've lost our sense of awe regarding the most holy things of God – His Name, His Body and Blood given us under bread and wine His Holy Word, from the Father, through the son and in the Spirit.

I've come to believe that in the astonishing rush to be relevant, some churches are discarding Biblical language. Yet, for centuries we have taken comfort in religious explanations, religious rituals, we've found refuge in the richness of the historic liturgy and we require spiritual explanations for what is happening in our lives for we are spiritual beings.

I admit that I'm a bit alarmed. An awful lot of pulpits are now preaching in my language: psychological words and phrases as well as explanations and solutions for man and man's predicament here on space ship earth. An awful lot of churches are no longer regarding life through stained glass lenses. We require spiritual explanations and spiritual language that diagnoses and addresses our ills. For if we don't use spiritual explanations and spiritual resources to respond to those ills, we will have been robbed of something precious and we will be left with the poverty of only man's wisdom.

In worship these days, I've discovered that not as many pulpits are talking about Law and Gospel sin and grace, preferring instead to talk about relevance, happiness and steps to confident living. For some the sermon has become a motivational pick-me-up – trying to cultivate the people a feeling of happiness and well-being. But the feeling is entirely man made and it just doesn't last. Some are replacing the treasures of the church's ancient and timeless expression of faith with (dare I say it?) psycho babble.

Why the fascination with things psychological?

No Freudian explanations will do. Yet my first impression is that obviously some clergymen are having a terrible case of psyche envy.

Our God did not promise us happiness. But he has given us His peace. We need to hear Biblical language in our preaching and prayers, thereby helping us to have the tiniest glimmer of the glory of our God, the magnificence of His holiness and ensuring that the blood bought gifts of Christ will never be confused with self-improvement.