

Devotions for the Nineteenth Week after Pentecost, October 4-8, 2021

Monday of Pentecost 19 – Prayer of the Week

Merciful Father, Your patience and loving-kindness toward us have no end. Grant that by Your Holy Spirit we may always think and do those things that are pleasing in Your sight; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

She was patient and she was kind. An African-American, she was caring for an elderly man, a white man, a man who had lived a long life. I did not know either of them, but saw this exchange in a nursing home some years ago. He was suffering from dementia. As often happens with those who suffer from dementia, when the façade of reason is stripped away, his character and personality traits were revealed and intensified. Chances are, he was not like this when he was in full possession of his faculties. To be honest, however, right now he was not a nice man. In fact, he said terrible things to and about this woman who was there help him.

She was patient and she was kind. I wanted to scold and rebuke this man for what he was saying. Some of it was truly vile. But she simply went about her work, bathing, changing, and caring for this man in his need. We note God's patience and loving-kindness to us in this prayer. Jesus wrapped a towel around Himself and washed the feet of His disciples to show all of us just what He was doing on the cross where He would die a few hours later.

I like to think that I am in the full possession of my faculties. But am I really? Or am I also, like this fellow, filled with thoughts and desires which I keep a lid on only with some effort? He could not hold the lid on his inner conversation anymore. If I can, am I really any different than he is? I count on God's patience and loving-kindness and need His Holy Spirit to think and do the things that are pleasing to God. Praise God for every moment He answers this prayer for you.

Tuesday of Pentecost 19 – Genesis 2:18-25

¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." ¹⁹ Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. ²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;

she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.”

²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. ²⁵ And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

I needed a battery at the local sell-everything big-box store the other day. It was a specialized battery, one of those flat little things that fit in a watch. I was directed to the electronics department. The young person who assisted me there was in transition, in the process of going from man to woman. He was quite helpful, and I said nothing intentionally offensive; although, it is getting harder and harder to avoid that in these situations. I never know quite what is offensive this week.

As I waited for my card to process and get my receipt, I wondered what had led to this place for this young person. I am sure my thoughts would have been offensive and when the thought police develop accurate thought detectors, I will surely have bigger problems. On a larger scale I find that I am wondering what has led to the place where we find ourselves as a society. Genesis 2 says that God made us male and female, that is a created category, not a chosen category. It does not say everyone will like it or that it is completely without tension, but it is given to us by a creator, a higher authority. My battery assistant believes that something as fundamental as sexual identity is something which can be chosen, put on and off like a garment. It might be far more complex than a new shirt and pair of pants, involving surgery and medicine, but it is still a choice which can be made.

Articulating a different view, a view which reflects this passage in Genesis and its fundamental understanding of what it means to be a creature of God is one of the great challenges of our generation for the Christian. God loves my battery assistant, you see. He grieves for the damage sin has done to His creation and the pain which has brought many to reject God and His authority. How will we speak of God's love to people, to all people? Pray for wisdom and pray for good witnesses to the joy, peace, and contentment of healthy, loving marriages.

Wednesday of Pentecost 19 – Psalm 128

Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways!

² You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;
you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.

³ Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.

⁴ Behold, thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the LORD.

⁵ The LORD bless you from Zion!
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life!

⁶ May you see your children's children!
Peace be upon Israel!

My old Greek professor at Washington University in St. Louis led the ideal Greek life. A decorated WWII bomber pilot, he had studied deep philosophical thoughts at Harvard, married, had children, and held his grandchildren on his knee. He instructed me shortly before his retirement. He was a devout Christian man who had advocated that the Lutheran seminary students at Concordia, St. Louis be allowed to further their Greek studies at Wash. U. It was good for the classics department, but it was also good for the preaching of the Word if men could develop a better facility in the language of the New Testament. He called it a win-win. I continue to think it was wise of him.

When I read this psalm, I think of him. He told the story of getting engaged while he was in graduate school at Harvard after the war. The faculty all solemnly shook his hand and wished him well, but he could tell that they thought he was making a terrible mistake and his studies would surely suffer for this decision. He felt like they were all saying, "Too bad, you had potential."

He was now the head of a department at a well-respected university. He had done quite well despite "diluting" his scholarship with his marriage. In fact, he had nothing but contempt for their condescension, even these many years later. I think his many lonely hours, interspersed with terror, spent flying a plane in war had given him a wisdom which Harvard could not. The wise person, the whole man or woman, is grounded in these relationships of family. Praise God for your family today. Sometimes they are hard to love, it is undoubtedly true for all of us, but they are a gift from God.

Thursday of Pentecost 19 – Hebrews 2:1-18

¹ Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ² For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

⁵ For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. ⁶ It has been testified somewhere,

“What is man, that you are mindful of him,
or the son of man, that you care for him?”

⁷ You made him for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned him with glory and honor,

⁸ putting everything in subjection under his feet.”

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. ⁹ But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

¹⁰ For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹ For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, ¹² saying,

“I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”

¹³ And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And again,

“Behold, I and the children God has given me.”

¹⁴ Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

One of my Concordia University students once gave me a book. He said I would like it. He was right. It is called “The Book of Strange New Things” by Michael Faber. It is a science fiction story, which I liked, but even better, it involves a Christian missionary. I won’t spoil it for you but by the end of the book, you are glad that you are human, and glad for some reasons you probably have never thought about before.

The world has a long history of people trying to get out of being human. It was a common idea in the ancient Greek world, and it remains one today. I think a lot of people imagine heaven to be a place where they escape being human, a place populated by see-through beings with wings and harps and halos. It never looks like they do much in these pictures of heaven. How can they, they are not people, they are ghosts!?

This passage of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus became a man, a real man. That is a good thing to be. He endured our temptations and freed us from the power of death. Death robs us of our humanity. By defeating death, Jesus preserves our humanity for us, and God has crowned humans with splendor and majesty and placed everything in subjection under humanity's feet. I think we often want to leave humanity because we have seen how sinful people have misused that role and done terrible things. Don't worry, Jesus has that in hand too. The humanity which He has preserved has also been purified, it is holy and good and uses its God-given authority to bless and heal, help, and serve. Be glad that Jesus has run the human race with you. It is good to be a human.

Friday of Pentecost 19 – Mark 10:2-16

² And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” ³ He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” ⁴ They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” ⁵ And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. ⁶ But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. ⁹ What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

¹⁰ And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹ And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

¹³ And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” ¹⁶ And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

No, she would not be coming back. She knew what “they” would say. Her pastor had not seen her in church since her divorce had been made public. Their marriage had been strained for some time. They had made it final. He had dropped by to check on her and urge her to come to worship. He knew that once she did attend a few times, she would be able to keep going, but that first time would be difficult for her.

She was right, there probably would be talk. In fact, not long ago, even though her own marriage was not always good, she would have been one of those to whisper in small groups. She knew what she was talking about.

Do you see the three groups in this reading today? There are the divorcees, the children, and the disciples. But in fact, there are truly only two groups. Jesus had no illusions about the innocence of children. If you have spent any time with children, even little children, you know too. They are

not innocent, rather they are helpless and vulnerable. The divorcees Jesus describes are helpless and vulnerable too. They cannot do anything to fix this situation, not really. Jesus says they are guilty of adultery. Did you notice there are no exceptions cited here? In the Torah, adultery is a stonable offence. Jesus wants them to feel that helplessness before their sin. Not because He wants them to stay there but because He opens His arms to helpless sinners, people who cannot solve their sin problems. Like little children He welcomes them into His arms. The divorcees and the children are the same.

Do modern disciples still rebuke them and keep them away and thereby risk the rebuke of Jesus? How I wish that those women who would have talked had instead come to visit this woman in her grief and heartache, shared their own struggles and their own grief. How I wish that they had invited their friend to come with them so that each of them could take their own broken lives to confession and absolution in that church.