

## Devotions for the Fifteenth Week after Pentecost – September 14-18

### Monday of Pentecost 15 – Prayer of the Week

O God, our refuge and strength, the author of all godliness, hear the devout prayers of Your Church, especially in times of persecution, and grant that what we ask in faith we may obtain; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*My friend Jon served a congregation which had welcomed a group of Sudanese Christians into their midst. He was taking some leaders in through a confirmation class so they could become teachers within their community. English was not their first language. When one encountered a long word, it was wise to stop and ask if they knew what it meant. "Crucifixion" was the word of the moment.*

*"Do you know what 'crucifixion' means?"*

*"Yeah, my cousin," said Tap, the tall, thin man with scars across his forehead.*

*"What do you mean, 'your cousin?'"*

*"The Islamic militia crucified my cousin. Nailed him to a wall. It took three days for him to die and all we could do was watch because the militia would shoot us if we came too close."*

*My friend sat in stunned silence for a moment. "Tap, I think you need to teach me," he said.*

*He got to know this Sudanese community and others around the country. If you ever get a chance, go to church with them. They know how to sing. It is not Bach chorales, but it is another music of great joy, often accompanied by nothing but a drum. This prayer says that God is the author of all godliness. I find it interesting that God writes godliness, authors it. Is it like DNA in our cells or a plotline in our lives? He wrote deep joy in the Sudanese people which even persecution could not quash. What good has God written in your heart?*

### Tuesday of Pentecost 15 – Genesis 50:15-21

<sup>15</sup> When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." <sup>16</sup> So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: <sup>17</sup> 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup> His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." <sup>19</sup> But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. <sup>21</sup> So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

*When a good friend was entering the fifth grade, his father accepted a Call to a small community located next to one of the interstate highways. For the next decade or so, he tells of how he fell asleep to the*

*sound of the semi-trucks laboring up and down the hills of Missouri. The church, a relatively new and impressive building, was within sight of the freeway. This meant a regular feature of the pastor's life was people who pulled off the highway looking for some help. Not too many years after they arrived a dilapidated station wagon pulled into the church parking lot. They all saw it; the parsonage was across the lot from the church. Within the car was a rough looking man and his family which included several children. This was the late 1970's and high inflation had seriously eroded the purchasing power of everyone's wages. The members of the parish were feeling the same pinch. My friend's father had no money to give to this family. But they did have a garden. He asked the man to wait. He came home and the kids were all marshalled into action. His mother made sandwiches. The kids picked an excellent melon from the garden. They could not give them money, but they could feed them.*

*He still remembers the look on his parents' faces when they walked onto the parking lot after the car drove off and we discovered all that food thrown out the window of their car. They had wanted money. They were not truly hungry as they had claimed. My mother wept.*

*In this reading today Joseph weeps. The Joseph story should be part of every Christian's Bible story collection. He had been humbled, sold as a slave by his brothers, thought dead, raised to power, and had rescued the very brothers who had thought to kill him. This scene takes place at the very end of the Joseph story. His father has died, and the brothers assume the worst. Now that Jacob is dead, Joseph will exact his revenge. But Joseph had forgiven them years earlier. You can read about it in Genesis 45. In this scene the brothers come begging for forgiveness and mercy. They had been living in senseless fear this whole time. They had not believed him when he said he forgave them. That is why Joseph wept. It hurts when a gift given is rejected.*

*Swallow your pride and humbly confess your sin. God, in Jesus, has forgiven you all your sins and continues to love you. It is hard to believe, to accept that. But it is true. God delights not in your punishment and death but in your joyful acknowledgment of what He has done for you. He forgives you of your sins. Like a loan forgiven, your sins are gone, removed from the books. No more interest, no more payments. You owe nothing. The IRS has no record of it, so you do not even have to claim it on your taxes. It is yours. Believe it.*

### **Wednesday of Pentecost 15 – Psalm 103:1-12**

Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and all that is within me,  
bless his holy name!

<sup>2</sup> Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits,

<sup>3</sup> who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases,

<sup>4</sup> who redeems your life from the pit,  
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

<sup>5</sup> who satisfies you with good  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

- <sup>6</sup> The LORD works righteousness  
and justice for all who are oppressed.
- <sup>7</sup> He made known his ways to Moses,  
his acts to the people of Israel.
- <sup>8</sup> The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- <sup>9</sup> He will not always chide,  
nor will he keep his anger forever.
- <sup>10</sup> He does not deal with us according to our sins,  
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
- <sup>11</sup> For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
- <sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west,  
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

*Unusually for politicians, President Calvin Coolidge (1923-1929) was known for being laconic, a man of few words. One Sunday he was caught by a reporter while leaving church. The reporter asked, "What was the sermon about?" "Sin," Silent Cal replied. "Well, what did he say?" the reporter followed up. "He's against it," said the president while walking away.*

*We are in a moment when our world seems fixated upon sin, or at least fixated upon some sins. But that has always been the case; we conveniently fixate upon some sins and not others. Our newsfeeds and televisions have brought us stories of protests and outrage triggered by the video-recorded deaths of people at the hands of the police. This did not start with BLM and the actions of these officers, however. Prior to the BLM movement there was MeToo with villains like Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby. Even Garrison Keillor of Prairie Home Companion-fame got caught up in that.*

*Like Silent Cal's preacher, I too join those who disapprove of sin. Unfortunately, our culture lacks a proper vocabulary for this moment. As a word, "Sin" has fallen out of use outside the dessert menu where the triple chocolate confection might be "sinfully good." But it is not only the vocabulary of sin which has been lost, it is also the vocabulary of redemption, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Perhaps they sound to "churchy" or "preachy" to some. But they also speak of a way to deal with the profound sins of this world.*

*Read this psalm again. In fact, pick up your Bible and read the whole psalm, it goes on for another 10 verses. As you do, notice what God does in all of this. God deals with the sins of people. He forgives, heals, redeem, crowns us with love and mercy, satisfies, and renews. That is just vss. 3-5. The real kicker for me comes in verse 12. Notice what He does with your sins and mine. He removes them from us, as far as the east is from the west. That happened in a cross when Jesus gathered up the sins of the world and paid their brutal price. He did that to my sins. He did that to everyone's sins. The world needs our words for this. The psalm ends with heavenly beings taking up the praise of God for His great work, His ministers in all His dominions. Lastly the soul of the Psalmist joins them anew. Our words for this world start with our own status as sinners forgiven, people whose sins have been removed. That status as sinner forgiven gives us a word to say to this moment. I encourage you to speak it.*

**Thursday of Pentecost 15** – Romans 14:1-12

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. <sup>2</sup> One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

<sup>5</sup> One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. <sup>6</sup> The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. <sup>7</sup> For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. <sup>8</sup> For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. <sup>9</sup> For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

<sup>10</sup> Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; <sup>11</sup> for it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,  
and every tongue shall confess to God.”

<sup>12</sup> So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

*There are six chief parts to our catechisms, and the fifth one, the section on the Office of the Keys, needs a bit more attention in these days. Luther, who wrote the catechism, had been shaped by his time as an Augustinian friar. As a friar, Luther would have been expected to confess his sins regularly, perhaps daily. He took this seriously. He tells of the time his confessor told him to go out and commit some real sins before he came back to confess again. While Luther thought that the rite of penance or confession and absolution needed to be reformed in his day, he also maintained throughout his life that the rite was valuable and good for people. He was not speaking of the general confession and absolution which we do in Church. He was speaking of a face to face conversation with another human being in which you confessed your own sins to that person.*

*This rite has largely fallen on hard times in modern Christianity. Not many come on a regular basis to be absolved individually by their pastor. If they have committed some great sin, perhaps some would come. Many would not. There is a rite for this in your hymnal. You should look it up and consider asking your pastor for an appointed time to meet. But if you do, there is something to keep in mind. You might call it the first rule of confession: You may only confess your own sins. You cannot confess the sins of someone else. All your statements really need to start with “I” as the subject of the verb. Your confession cannot speak of what he or she did, only the deeds and failures of you, the one making confession.*

*I think we should revive this salutary practice, if for no other reason than the final verses of this reading. If more of us remembered that we stand before the judgment seat of God, this world would go a little better. That awareness gives one a measure of empathy for the weak. When you rely upon the forgiveness of Christ, you tend have a little more patience with the neighbor who has fallen or whose*

*faith is weak and deformed. It is hard to stand before that divine judgment seat. How often I have heard myself or another sinner try to confess the sins of others to excuse the sin which really belonged to me or the speaker. God will have none of that, nor should we. I may or may not be able to understand the sins of another person, but understanding sins makes nothing truly better. Only forgiveness makes things better and I can forgive both the reasonable and unreasonable sins because Jesus died for them all.*

**Friday of Pentecost 15 – Matthew 18:21-35**

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. <sup>25</sup> And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup> So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup> He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. <sup>35</sup> So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

*I knew a man once who was driven mad by guilt. That can still happen in some parts of the world unencumbered by reality TV and the mentality of victimhood which seems to excuse any misdeed. This man did not claim to have been abused or otherwise the victim of some injustice. He had committed insurance fraud and he knew it. This truth ate at him. Years later he started doing irrational things, mostly around money. He would see a good deal on socks at Walmart and buy whole cartful. He would concoct wild schemes to buy his neighbors farms and radically expand his modest operation.*

*Finally, his family and friends intervened, and a counsellor drew out of him a confession of his sin, now decades old. All his erratic behavior had been attempts to raise the cash to make right his theft of insurance money. The counsellor, being a Christian, realized that this was out of her league. She called his pastor. His pastor heard his confession and absolved him of his sins. And his madness cleared. He was still a little odd, but he had always been a little odd. Everyone was relieved to have his eccentricities back, to be honest.*

*This little story of the man driven mad by guilt hinges on faith. He believed that his actions had consequences, even if he had not been caught in his fraud. He also believed that the absolution spoken by his pastor was a real thing, an action which removed his guilt. The man in this story which Jesus tells does not believe. He acknowledges his debt to be sure, but he does not believe the king when that king forgave his debt. He accosts his fellow servant, demanding money, right now. He is trying to raise funds to repay the forgiven debt. It is a little mad of him. Jesus would have you shake your head in wonder at his foolish behavior. But is not our grudge-bearing, vindictive, score-settling, moral bean-counting behavior any different today? Jesus warns us that such behavior is rooted in a disbelief in God's grace, and that always starts with the grace He has shown to us. Take a good look at the sins of another person today and remember that Jesus has died for that sin and that person just as surely as he died for you and your sins. Treat that other person today in the light of that reality.*