

Devotions for the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost – October 5

Monday of Pentecost 18 – Prayer of the Week

Gracious God, You gave Your Son into the hands of sinful men who killed Him. Forgive us when we reject Your unfailing love, and grant us the fullness of Your salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Do you know one of those older couples who “share a brain?” You know the sort. Maybe you are one of those people. Maybe you are a widow or widower grieving the loss of your other half. If so, I pray for you. Such couples complete each other’s sentences. You can hardly imagine them without the other. As I look at those couples and their beautiful relationships, I wonder if they have a sense of being more married today than they were on the day of their wedding.

Of course, as far as the IRS or the government is concerned, married is a yes or a no question. You cannot be more married or less married. But the law cannot really see some very important things, like love and the intertwining of two lives into a single life.

We pray today that God grants us the fullness of His salvation. Is salvation something you can have more or less of? Not really, not in one sense. On the day of your baptism you were fully and completely saved by God. His love has been given to you. You have God’s favor. But on the other hand, like any relationship, this relationship with God can and does grow. Am I more saved today than on the day that I was baptized? Am I more of a Christian? Yes! Thanks and praise to God. His persistent forgiveness and love to me are like the waters that shape the landscape one droplet at a time. God is shaping me into His person, and we are growing closer to one another. There are many stony places in a human heart which require a great deal of God’s loving erosion to make them fit for heaven. Will God have to break out the drill and insert some dynamite to blast it away? I am a work in progress. The fullness of salvation is something I look forward to. Pray for it today.

Tuesday of Pentecost 18 – Isaiah 5:1-7

Let me sing for my beloved
my love song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
² He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;

and he looked for it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.

³ And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem
and men of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.

⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard,
that I have not done in it?
When I looked for it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?

⁵ And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.

⁶ I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and briers and thorns shall grow up;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.

⁷ For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
and he looked for justice,
but behold, bloodshed;
for righteousness,
but behold, an outcry!

"You said you would be here!" he barked.

"I had to..."

"Don't want to hear it. Remember, no excuses."

I watched this exchange with some perplexity. The man who was barking at his son seemed out of character, unlike the reasonable and gentle fellow I otherwise knew. Later we talked about it. His son was addicted to one drug or another. He had stolen from his parents and others, lied again and again, and disappointed them repeatedly. It was a pattern I had seen play out in the lives of people who love those who are addicted. Yet, with tears in his eyes, this man confessed his love for his wayward son. The son needed boundaries and rules. He had proven himself

unfaithful time and again, but he was still his son. He only barked at him because he loved him. The opposite of love is not hate, it is "I don't care."

God laments the vineyard for which he has cared, but which has produced only sour grapes. The people of Israel are the vineyard of the Lord. He looks for justice, but he sees bloodshed. As I write these words cities have once more erupted into violent protests as the Kentucky Attorney General's office has announced that the officers in Louisville who caused Breonna Taylor's death will not be charged. Humans hunger for justice too. They see this young woman's death and think someone should be held accountable for it. I am reminded of Jesus' words to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Mt. 5:6).

Isaiah's prophecy of God's destruction of the vineyard and the trampling of the vines would find its fulfillment in the Exile, some years after the ministry of Isaiah. But what we know of that event is that the Exile was God keeping His promise to His people made at Sinai. He had promised them that if they forgot him, He would call them back, gently at first but with increasing intensity. The people who returned from exile were far more devoted to God than they had been before the exile. In a sense, it worked. It was brutally difficult, but it worked. God still looks upon this world with the profound disappointment of the vineyard owner in this extended metaphor of Isaiah. His providential love sometimes brings difficult things to us to call us to repent. The Christian, however, has an insight which the world does not know. One day, about 800 years after Isaiah wrote these words, the blood which was unjustly shed by the children of these Israelites was the blood of Jesus and that has changed everything. God's love for His rebellious, foolish, violent world is never in doubt. Pandemics, social unrest, hurricanes, forest fires, and whatever else 2020 can throw at us cannot shake that truth. Jesus has died for this world. No matter how hard God barks at His rebellious children, He always loves them.

Wednesday of Pentecost 18 – Psalm 80:7-19

- ⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved!
- ⁸ You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
- ⁹ You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.
- ¹⁰ The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches.
- ¹¹ It sent out its branches to the sea
and its shoots to the River.
- ¹² Why then have you broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

- ¹³ The boar from the forest ravages it,
and all that move in the field feed on it.
- ¹⁴ Turn again, O God of hosts!
Look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine,
- ¹⁵ the stock that your right hand planted,
and for the son whom you made strong for yourself.
- ¹⁶ They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down;
may they perish at the rebuke of your face!
- ¹⁷ But let your hand be on the man of your right hand,
the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!
- ¹⁸ Then we shall not turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call upon your name!
- ¹⁹ Restore us, O LORD God of hosts!
Let your face shine, that we may be saved!

The professor looked at the tears streaming down the face of the student who sat in his office. He had never failed a test before. It was not part of his experience. The student understood that he should have studied harder. He should have been more attentive class. He should have read the textbook more carefully. He should have... but he did not. Now, his GPA, scholarships, and eligibility were in jeopardy.

The professor's impassive face hid a roiling set of emotions. He remembered his own college days, sometimes spent in pursuits which were insufficiently academic in nature. He too had borne the consequences of inadequate study and attention. It would be a simple thing, really, to say that the score did not matter so much. Had he not read somewhere that tests were poor evaluative tools? He wanted to alleviate those tears, to take away their cause. Suffering is hard to watch.

He did not follow that course. He also remembered that his own brush with failure had refocused his entire academic career. Other students had worked hard to perform on this exam and had succeeded. This young man needed to learn this lesson. The score would stand. He could work his way out of the hole he had dug. It would be hard, but he could do it.

We do not know the exact situation of this psalm. Was it written in the days of the Exile or some other affliction which God had visited upon the people of Israel? Using the same image which Isaiah so skillfully enjoined in yesterday's text, the psalmist here gives us the words of the vineyard whose walls have been broken and which has been ravaged by the wild boar that uproots its vines. "Please" the psalmist cries, "let your face shine upon us that we may be restored."

The human beings of planet earth in 2020 might make that their cry as well. The year has been a wild ride so far. We are not done yet. Will 2021 be any better? We could use a little of God's face shining upon us. I have no prophecy to share in this regard, except to proclaim that God's love has never ceased. The professor who let his student's failure stand did not do so out of some spite. He did it because he cared for the character and life of that student. God hears the prayers of His people today. He responds only in love. It might be unpleasant, but it will be love.

Thursday of Pentecost 18 – Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Did your grandmother ever make a button spinner for you? It is one of those old-time toys that grandmothers like to make. String several feet of thread twice through a heavy button, tie it off to make a circle of thread, loop it through your fingers so the button is suspended between your hands. Flip the button so the thread has about ten twists and start pulling your hands apart and then relaxing on the string. The button will start spinning. You can get it moving pretty quickly with a little practice. The trick is to relax the tension and reapply it at the right times. If you do not know what I am talking about, do an internet search for "button spinner" and you can watch one in action.

Paul sounds a little like that button in this passage. In his previous life, before his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, the tension had been great. It almost broke him. He had become sort of a monster, persecuting people. Christ relaxed that tension and he rebounded the other way, spinning furiously for the Gospel. Here we see him admitting that he has not made it yet, but he says, "I press on to make it my own." But then, he remembers, and the pressure comes off "because Christ has me his own."

My picture breaks down a little here. Paul does not now spin back the other way into his old legalism, but the tension and relaxation of God's Law and Gospel have put a great deal of energy into Paul's life. In II Corinthians 11:22 he does another similar catalogue of his life, but this time goes past his conversion. He never really did slow down. I get exhausted just reading about it.

God is adding quite a bit of tension into the lives of people these days. I wonder what He is up to with all this. Some days I was weary of this world even before pandemic and tensions which permeate our world now. The past few months, there have been whole days in which I do not want to check my newsfeeds or listen to the radio. If you need it, you have my permission to sit on the patio or in a favorite chair with the cat or a book for a while today and do nothing. But more importantly Paul reminds us of the great relaxation which God has given us. Paul forgets that which lies behind him. Christ's forgiveness and love has covered all of it. That frees Paul to look ahead and strive for what God has promised, an upward calling in Christ.

Friday of Pentecost 18 – Matthew 21:33-46

³³ “Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. ³⁴ When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. ³⁵ And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ ³⁹ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹ They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.”

⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is marvelous in our eyes”?

⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. ⁴⁴ And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.

"Hear another parable." Jesus is getting desperate, but not because these men to whom He is speaking are about to kill him. He knows how this will play out. It is Holy Week when He speaks these words, those tense days leading up to His crucifixion and resurrection. No, Jesus is desperate for their sake. "Hear another parable." Why another? He is going to die anyway. They will conspire and plot, suborn His disciple, and finally push His case through a hastily convened kangaroo court. The governor will cave to their demands and Jesus will die the tortuous death of the accursed, crucified by Roman soldiers. He is not trying to change that with this parable. He has come to save this whole world through that death. Peter tried to dissuade Jesus from this earlier in the book and Jesus called that Satan's way of thinking. Why another parable?

I see Jesus' gaze moving from man to man, and they were all men, in that crowd of Pharisees, Sadducees, Priests, and scribes. He stops on each face. Were some of them wavering? Nicodemus had wavered and secretly followed Him. Joseph of Arimathea was one of the elites in town. He would ask for Jesus' body along with Nicodemus after Jesus' death. There were those in that crowd who might be called out of their hatred and into something else. Is that why Jesus tells another parable?

The religious leaders did not miss the point of the parable. They were the wretched tenants and the owner of the vineyard would surely put them to a wretched end. Does Jesus pause a little longer on the face of the old man in the second row of His enemies? Does He see a glimmer of doubt there? Is that what He is looking for. Does He tell this parable for that man, so he can escape the crushing judgment which follows their terrible deed?

I have imagined all this. I do not know that this scene played out in just this way. But Jesus loved the men who murdered Him with a judicial system. He spoke one more parable because He loved them and would that they not participate in this betrayal of justice. Hear another parable and repent. It is not too late. God's love is deep and wide and enough for you too. Hear another parable.