

Devotions for the Nineteenth Week of Pentecost – October 12-16

Monday of Pentecost 19 – Prayer of the Week

Almighty God, You invite us to trust in You for our salvation. Deal with us not in the severity of Your judgment but by the greatness of Your mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

One year, when I was young, I remember a neighbor getting a Christmas card from the President. It was a very large and impressive Christmas card, embossed with the presidential seal. They had not been big supporters of the president to have made it on the mailing list in that way. In fact, they weren't sure why they had received it! But they weren't shy about showing off the presidential Christmas card and having a few laughs about it all.

Of course, the joke hung on the unlikely event that the President, I think it was Ronald Reagan at the time, would have sent a small farmer such a card. It was just so unlikely. Why would the president care about "little ol' me"?

We base this prayer on a fact which we must believe. We cannot prove it. Almighty God, yes, the one who created everything and keeps the planets in their orbits, that God, has invited you, the humble sinner who stares out of your mirror every morning. That is even more unlikely than a country farmer getting a card from the President of the United States. God has done just that. It was not some blanket invitation like the president addressing his fellow Americans from our screens. This was a personal invitation, just for you, which may have come only days or even moments after were born, when you were reborn in the waters of Baptism. God spoke your name that day. He looked in the uniqueness of your eyes and memorized them. He called you son or daughter and promised to love you always.

When I was a child I trusted implicitly. I did not fear when my mother or father scooped me up from the crib. Indeed, I likely looked forward to it. Though they held me many body-lengths above the ground, I trusted their embrace, could fall asleep in it. Trusting gets harder sometimes when you get further along in life. God's invitation to trust is creative. He created the faith that trusted in Him on my baptismal day and He continues to create that faith which trusts Him today. God does save us because God is merciful to sinners. Trust it. Count on it. Expect it.

Tuesday of Pentecost 19 – Isaiah 25:6-9

⁶ On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

⁷ And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,

the veil that is spread over all nations.

⁸ He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.

⁹ It will be said on that day,
“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the LORD; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

Not long ago, on a Saturday, I met some folks in a cemetery. Their mom/grandmother had died. It had been a full and long life. Now it was over, and she was to be buried beside her husband. It is the days of COVID, so things were different. Our health department is not as draconian as some. I spoke with a pastor recently who had to jump a cemetery fence after hours to meet a family at a graveside and conduct a service. We did not have to do that. The group was small; although, many would have liked to have come. I have been a pastor for many years which means that I have frequently accompanied a casket from a hearse to a grave with a grieving family. Some of this felt normal. Some of it did not.

These words are frequently read at funerals. Isaiah speaks explicitly about the resurrection from the dead and the defeat of death by Christ. God swallows up the sheet that covers all the people. He swallows up death itself. Because our gathering happened in the days of COVID the cemetery staff was on hand. Because these gatherings are limited to immediate family, they never know if enough people will be there to serve as pall bearers to convey the casket to the grave. We conscripted her son, a nephew, along with a few friends, not young men anymore, so the cemetery staff were not needed. But they were there with us, incongruous in their working clothes beside our dark suits. COVID has relaxed some things, I believe. In normal times the cemetery staff would lurk at a distance if they were there at all. They would wait until the last car drove away and only then lower the body into the grave.

The family lingered and the nervous funeral home director asked if they minded if the men set to their job. The family are strong Christians. Death does not intimidate them. Christ has defeated that foe and its terrors no longer cow them. They welcomed a few last moments at the grave. We all watched as her casket was lowered into the ground, the sheet that covers all of us. Now we wait. We wait for a day of resurrection and new life, for our lives are hidden with Christ's life. It will be said on that day, "This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

Wednesday of Pentecost 19 – Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

³ He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

Today we have before us what I think is the most successful poem ever written. It was penned by King David, fully 3,000 years ago. I will be surprised if anyone is reading the devotions from this week a year from now. David's poem is not only still published, it is popular. People who otherwise do not read poetry often have a little plaque or picture with these words inscribed hanging somewhere in their house. These are the words of comfort folks turn to when they are in the hospital, facing death, or alone and afraid. I have encountered it on posters in college dorm rooms and on the walls of nursing home residents. We have lots of poetry from that time. Homer's Iliad and Odyssey are roughly as old. We have some poetry from the Middle East that is even older. You will not, however, find plates and posters bearing the words of Homer or the Gilgamesh epic hanging in many homes. David is arguably the most successful poet who ever lived.

What does one say about such passage? Perhaps the less said, the better. You do not need me to make these words meaningful. But if you would indulge me, re-read these words slowly and deliberately. Emphasize the personal pronouns in each line: "The Lord is MY shepherd..." I learned this from a dear friend who now rests in Jesus. Today, he knows these things by sight, no longer by faith. You and I, however, still need these ancient words of David to remind us of what God has promised us. He really is my shepherd. I shall not want.

Thursday of Pentecost 19 – Philippians 4:1-13

¹ Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

² I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. ³ Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰ I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

You could have cut the tension in the house with a knife. The long-married couple were having an argument, and it was a big one. Brows were furrowed and jaws set in determined faces. Icy stares and cold shoulders were the order of the day. The kids were walking on eggshells lest they set off a bomb.

There was not much joy in that house. Have you ever been in that house? Many of us have. Sometimes those moments haunt us for the rest of our lives. A home perpetually in conflict is even worse. The moment I am thinking of was resolved by a friend, a friend who had the courage to point out just how ridiculous the couple were being in their rage. Tears were shed, forgiveness sought, forgiveness given.

Paul writes to the people in Philippi from prison, but he writes about joy. In the first verses of chapter four he mentions a conflict, a fight between two women in Philippi named Euodia and Syntyche. Paul seems to be asking the Pastor or other leaders in the congregation to mediate, helping these women come to a resolution of their conflict. We do not know what the substance of the argument was. It does not matter. These conflicts suck the joy out of any room.

When the old couple I am thinking of forgave one another, joy returned to that house. We often start this reading at verse 4, treating the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche as an event randomly inserted and disconnected from the joyful life which Paul describes in the bulk of this

passage. That is a mistake. Paul's injunctions to rejoice in the Lord always, to be reasonable, to think about things that are honest, true, just, pure, praiseworthy, etc., make the most sense as a program for living out forgiveness. These are the conscious and deliberate choices you must make when you forgive someone who has hurt you. Forgiveness is doing these things despite what the other has done.

Try it. It brings real joy.

Friday of Pentecost 19 – Matthew 22:1-14

And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, ²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, ³and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, “See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.”’ ⁵But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. ⁷The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’ ¹⁰And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹“But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. ¹²And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.”

A seminary classmate of mine had his first parish in a small place in a very LDS community in Utah. They were not a large Lutheran church, but they were close to one another. In the parish was an elderly widower. He was something of a character, much beloved by the members. Hard of hearing and fond of big-band music, one always knew he was coming to church long before his massive blue Lincoln Continental slalomed around the corner into the parking lot. You could hear the music playing from a block away.

He tells the story of being at a gathering one night at Kay's house when this elderly friend seemed morose. Kay was one of the pillars of the congregation, a wise woman who was steeped in the Gospel. My friend's wife, always perceptive to such things, asked him if he was OK. He admitted that he was sad. It was the anniversary of his dear Mary's death. We were heartbroken for him and said something to Kay after our friend left that night. Kay gave us the look. “Don't feel too badly. Mary was wife #5.” It was our first introduction to the fact that our friend had not always been the faithful church-going type who was an usher on Sunday

mornings. As he declined, the pastor would call on him and often he was going through some of his memorabilia. He had been stationed overseas, working for one of the U. S. government intelligence branches. We never knew quite what he did. He showed off an album of pictures from his time overseas, pictures of his younger self with a bevy of attractive secretaries. The pictures had all been slashed. "Yeah," told me. "My second wife did that."

Jesus tells a parable of a king who throws a wedding feast for his son, but the expected guests do not come. So, he sends his servants out to compel the least likely of people into the kingdom, the good and the bad. In the ancient world, the guests at a wedding were given a new garment to wear. It was a little like a party favor. The master's indignation at the man without the garment is not anger at the fellow's failure to dress up. It is anger at the rejection of the gift.

At the resurrection of the dead, I look forward to seeing many beloved people who have died. We will no longer have to shout to be heard by our hard-of-hearing friends. Together we will rejoice in our new clothes. Maybe we will all laugh together about our new friend and his blue Continental and questionable driving skills. God opens His kingdom wide and invites all sorts of folks to His Son's wedding. He even invited you and me.