

Sunday June 25th, 2017

Pentecost 2

PRAYER: We are your disciples, Lord. How we want to be like you! We are your servants, Lord. How we want to serve like you! Take our minds; enlighten them. Take our hearts: awaken them. Take our hands: enliven them-not that we might be made great through you, but that you might be made great through us! Amen.

CALL TO CONFESSION: In our brokenness, we have refused the refuge of God's love. Let us confess the sin that prevents us from accepting God's love.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: God, in your mercy you shelter us as a dove with its wings shelters its young against the storm. If we seek your loving presence, we will always find refuge, refreshment, and the strength to cope with hardship. We confess that we do not always seek your love in times of affliction, for we find despair easier than trust. Forgive us God. When King Saul was tormented, the soothing melodies of David brought him tranquility. We confess that we seldom soothe those who are troubled. Instead, we aggravate tensions and fears. We ask mercy, O God, for our failure to offer compassion. Cleanse our hearts of mistrust, and fill us with a love strong enough to offer others refuge. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: God extends the gracious promise of rest to us: "Come to me, all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Accept the precious gift of Christ's forgiveness and peace. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (1 John 3:17-18)

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God, you possess all beginnings and all endings. In the morning, you are the cradle of the world and in the evening, you are the world's comforter. You are the morning dew kissing the buds of the flowers and the evening mist rising through the falling leaves. You are the early sun announcing the dawning of a new day and the twilight whispering the secrets of another.

You, O God, possess all beginnings and endings, all falling and rising, all living and dying. All your people, all of your creation swells with the rhythms of life and death and rebirth. These rhythms compel us to sing, to laugh, to dance, to dream. We sing of sorrows borne despite anguish and of joys known despite fear. We laugh at mistakes made in our weakness and at changes begun in our strength. We dance to the harmonies of the universe and to the melodies with our own souls. And we dream of possible worlds on the strength of what we know of the world we live in.

We stand today as a people of faith, convinced not by the persuasion of our minds but by the experience of our lives. We are convinced that all is as you say it is-that you do number every hair on every head and see our every step.

We believe, O God, but our faith ebbs away, we feel the pain of the world, and that pain spills over into our lives. We know of infants that die without taking one breath. Fields of grain that burn or are destroyed by hail before they can be harvested. Old friends suffer diseases that are years away from any possible cure. Tornadoes rip through the poorest neighbourhoods.

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Innocent people are caught in the cross fire between governments. Workers lose jobs they have had for years, while the unemployed have been turned away so many times they have traded hope for tears. And they children, O God; children abused because they wear the wrong colour skin, speak the wrong language, live under the wrong flag, worship the wrong god-these little ones have no hope to lose.

The list is long, O God, and our lament is tearful. But, somewhere in the midst of our sorrows, you are walking, holding hands, lifting up, mending wounds, breathing new life, and receiving the old. This we believe, and in this belief, we find strength to remember and respond.

You have remembered us from the first to the last. We pray that you might grant us the compassion to count one another daily. Let us reach to those who stumble, and break their fall; to the fallen, that we might pull them to their feet. Let us be caught when we are about to faint; and be lifted up, when we are struggling to rise.

BENEDICTION: Be not dismayed, whatever befalls you. You are more valuable than sparrows, and not one of them falls to the ground without the Lord knowing. Do not fear, nor be afraid. Only acknowledge the Christ in word and deed, and you will find yourself in the presence of God. Amen.

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Matthew 10:24-39

“Denied”

On a busy street in New York City, a man hustles across an intersection and is just about to make it to the other side when he is hit by a bus. He lies dying on the sidewalk as a crowd gathers around. “A priest. Somebody get me a priest!” the man gasps in pain. A policeman who had arrived on the scene checks the crowd, but there is no priest to be found. In fact, there is no minister or any other kind of spiritual leader present.

“A priest, please!” the desperate man pleads. The man’s condition is so bad that there is not time to call for a priest, and the policeman is at a loss as to what to do. Suddenly, an old Jewish man of 80 makes his way through the crowd. “Excuse me officer, I’m not a priest. I’m not even catholic. But for 50 years now I’ve lived behind St. Elizabeth’s Catholic Church on First Avenue and every night I listen to the Catholic litany.

Maybe I can repeat some of the familiar words to bring the poor man some comfort.” The policeman agrees, and brings over the elderly gentleman, and helps him kneel beside the injured man. The Jewish man bows his head, clears his throat and in a very solemn voice says, “Under the B-4, I-19, N-38, G-54, O-72.” We may chuckle at the idea that the Jewish man thought bingo calling was a religious ritual, but like so many people religion seems clothed in mystery.

If you are trying to get close to God, and understand his people and their ways, it can be a daunting task. It is frustrating, isn’t it? It is frustrating to know that other people have secret information that they will not divulge to you. In religious circles, this perceived lack of sharing vital information, has led to enormous frustration, anger, and in many cases people dismissing religion as a pursuit of the elite.

The Christian church has had its own criticism of hiding the whole truth from the world, and especially from sincere believers. Entire, heretical groups have sprung up over the church’s history, claiming to have special insight, or knowledge, that only its selected adherents will ever hear. One such group, were called Gnostics, which comes from the Greek word “gnosis” meaning knowledge.

The Gnostics even had their own Gospels like the Judas gospel, or the gospel of Thomas. The Gnostic gospels are also the inspiration for all kinds of speculation about hidden truths in the church, like what is portrayed in stores about the Illuminati or Knights Templar. Recently there was of course the daVinci Code and it is interesting that the Vatican has refused movie producers access to Catholic churches in Rome to film the prequel to the daVinci Code called Angels and Demons.

This refusal is born out of the Vatican’s outrage at the claims made in the DaVinci code about Jesus and Mary Magdalene being married and having children. Some other religious groups still have secret ceremonies, such as Mormons or Later-Day Saints as they like to be called, where only members are allowed to attend special marriage ceremonies.

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Then there is the common experience that many of us might have, where we turn on our television, or read a book by a celebrity Christian preacher, who claims to have found the secret. Usually a secret attained if only we would do certain things, or perhaps send him or her, a sizable donation. Of major concern to me, is the guilt that is sold to naïve people, who believe a slick preacher who tells them that all the problems in their lives can be solved if they only had more faith.

It is so frustrating to people, whose lives are being devastated by things out of their control, to be told that somehow it is entirely all their fault. People are frustrated at being told that the reason that we are not happy, go lucky people, blessed with every imaginable material good, is a lack of knowledge or a certain type of faith. Sounds like Gnostic preaching to me. The truth is, there is no secret to finding happiness in life, because, and I am glad you are sitting down for this; we were never meant to find it. At least not the kind of happiness we think of when we use the word.

We often think of happiness as a sort of: giddy sense of euphoria, a state of constant laughter, peace, and most likely always getting our own way. When we don't experience this type of happiness on a regular sustained basis, we get angry. We get angry at: God, at the people who steal away our blissful state, and at the church for not telling us the secrets. The truth is, if we take Jesus seriously, that is take him at his word, you may never experience anywhere near the level of happiness you may think you deserve, or in our muddled thinking, believe we are promised.

If we take Jesus seriously, and we should if we claim to be his disciples, then how do we reconcile Matthew chapter ten with prosperity preaching. I think of passages like this one, and there is another in Luke 14 which is quite similar, as a kind of the fine print of any contract to follow Jesus. But unlike many of our legal contracts with small print, Jesus lays it all out in front of us.

Jesus is saying something like, "Follow me, and I can guarantee: persecution, strife in your families, threats, poverty, exclusion from friends and neighbours. You will be called on to turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile and give your prized possessions away. Your secrets, and those of your family, will become known as if someone were shouting them from the mountain top. Your body will likely be harmed, but your soul shall be preserved."

It is no wonder that prosperity preachers never preach on passages like this. It is almost as if these passages were somehow excluded from their bibles. If we take Jesus seriously, then when we read over this passage, suddenly, coming to church and following Jesus is made very uncomfortable. And that is the point of this passage. If I am comfortable in my Christian faith, then I am not truly following Christ.

Because if I am comfortable, that means I have made Jesus into something of my own creation.

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I have picked and chosen those aspects of Christ, and of discipleship, that are easy for me, and have deliberately ignored those that challenge me and move me out of my comfort zone. It is as if I have made faith out to be like a supermarket, where I can go about through the aisles of faith, picking out my favourites like chocolate ice cream and leaving the disliked things like beets or raisins behind.

For me personally, Matthew 10 is, in terms of faith, like eating beets and raisins. I would rather pass, thank you very much, but I can't pass on it. That's the truth. If you want to follow Jesus then you must accept the whole package, even the parts we don't want. Lee Eclov of Vernon Hills, Illinois tells a story from his childhood that speaks to our aversion to the hard aspects of following Jesus. He writes...

When I was a kid in the mid 50's, Parker Brothers came out with a game for church families like ours. It was called "Going to Jerusalem." Your playing piece wasn't that Scottie dog, like in the "worldly" game of Monopoly. In "Going to Jerusalem," you got to be a real disciple. You were represented by a little plastic man with a robe, a beard, some sandals, and a staff.

In order to move across the board, you looked up answers to questions in the little black New Testament provided with the game. I remember that you always started in Bethlehem, and you made stops at the Mount of Olives, Bethsaida, Capernaum, the stormy sea, Nazareth, and Bethany.

If you rolled the dice well, you went all the way to a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But you never got to the crucifixion or Resurrection. There were no demons or angry Pharisees. You only made your way through nice stories. It was a safe adventure, perfectly suited for a Christian family on a Sunday afternoon walk with Jesus.

Lee continues: *It never occurred to me, while leaning over the card table jiggling dice in my hand, that traveling with Jesus wasn't meant for plastic disciples who looked up verses in a little black Bible. If you are going to walk with Jesus as his disciple in this world, you may need to change your expectations. After all, Jesus said, "Take up your cross, and follow me." (From Preaching Today)*

Faith lived authentically, is an adventure; an adventure of heroic proportions. This is a concept that we fail to grasp, and certainly fail to appreciate. Jesus speaks of following him as like going into battle. He speaks of bringing swords, and of willingly sacrificing ourselves to the cause. He uses this language because the world hates the cross and our Lord who hung upon it.

The world hates the truth that God calls us to account, and that salvation is only possible through Jesus. Whenever, some great cause emerges in this world, it always confronts people with a choice; either you accept it or reject it. In terms of Christ and his Kingdom the world wants to shut it down, shut it out, and shut it up. There will in turn be conflict between the world and Christ's followers, because true followers of Jesus won't shut down, shut out, or shut up.

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Jesus will not tolerate a false sense of peace or happiness, if it means people compromising their faith. Jesus is into truth lived openly and courageously. Maybe that is why David Murrow caused quite a stir a while ago, with his book, *Why Men hate Going to Church*. The *Chicago Tribune* reporting on the book wrote,

Men are bored out of their churches. Services and Bible study classes have become too safe, too soft, too nurturing. Men don't want to sit around talking about feelings and relationships. They want assigned tasks and goals...Most churches try and tame men instead of helping them find their own adventure.

I don't think boredom is a gender issue. I believe women get just as bored in church, and feel just as strongly that something deeply profound is missing in their lives of faith. May I humbly suggest that perhaps what is lacking is any sense of adventure in our faith journey? For too long, we have been encouraged to become observers of faith, by simply coming once a week, getting a pep talk, and then going home to our regular existence.

Jesus is shouting at us from Matthew 10, that all of us, men and women, need to engage in battles, large and small. Battles that are being waged between his kingdom and the world. But we cannot be naïve, this involvement has consequences. It will cost you something of yourself. It will probably cost you relationships, physical pain, emotional strife, and maybe even your lives. That's the truth about following Jesus, we cannot hide it.

But I want to tell you that should you decide to pick up your cross and follow Jesus, you are not without resources. God has equipped his spiritual warriors well. Perhaps the greatest of these resources is God's infinite love and care of those who are his children. A care and knowledge of his children that is so deep that the very hairs on our heads are counted.

And if God knows all there is to know about his world, to the point that even the death of a sparrow does not escape his attention, how can we be crippled by fear, when on the front lines of the advance of God's Kingdom.

Perhaps after reflecting on Matthew chapter 10 we realize that following Jesus is not what we imagined it would be like; but I would rather live the adventure God has prepared for me, than wasting away on the sidelines. We have got to embrace that Jesus' way is different than the world, and because of this, when we commit to him we will be different as well.

A.W. Tozer expresses it well when he wrote, "The real Christian is an odd number anyway. He feels supreme love for One whom he has never seen, talks familiarly every day to Someone he cannot see, expects to go to heaven on the virtue of Another, empties himself in order to be full, admits he is wrong so he can be declared right, goes down in order to get up, is strongest when he is weakest, richest when he is poorest, and happiest when he feels worst.

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He dies so he can live, forsakes in order to have, gives away so he can keep, sees the invisible, hears the inaudible, and knows that which passes knowledge.” (The Root of Righteousness)

Are you looking for adventure, some grand purpose or meaning for your life, well there is no secret being kept from you? There is no special knowledge some spiritual guru has, and if you pay him or her some money they will pass it along to you. God has revealed everything of value and purpose for our lives in the person of Jesus Christ. If you come to him you will have your answers, you will have your direction, and you will have your purpose.

In fact, after turning to Jesus, you may find that the questions that burdened you no longer matter; especially after we come to rest in his loving embrace. For, he is the rock on which we stand, and everything else is just sinking sand.