

Sunday August 18th, 2019
Pentecost 10

PRAYER: O God, you have cast fire upon the earth; its heat sears our troubled conscience. We are weary with running from its flames-we can run no longer. O Lord, let them consume every sin that clings closely to us, that to you we may commit our cause and entrust our life! With all our hearts we seek you-baptize us with your presence!

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: Merciful Father, we confess we have failed you-spurning the resources of prayer, doubting your power to intervene in human life and world events. We confess we have failed those we love and those who depend upon us-not loving as fully as we can, leaving kind words unsaid, withholding caring actions, doing and saying things that wound others. We confess that we have failed ourselves-making feeble use of our gifts, falling short of our goals, failing to allow ourselves to accept forgiveness for our faults and the grace to begin anew. God, in your unfailing mercy, grant us the peace to part with past failure and the courage graciously to accept the future you offer. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: God, who is rich in mercy, bids you lift your hearts and realize his presence. See God's immeasurable grace in kindness toward us in Christ! In grace you have been saved through faith. It is the gift of God! Believe and accept the gift: your sins are forgiven. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: "No one shall come into the presence of the Lord empty handed. Each of you shall bring such a gift as he can in proportion to the blessing which the Lord your God has given you." (Deut. 16:16, 17)

PASTORAL PRAYER: Directing, guiding, leading God; our individual paths over these summer weeks has brought us to adventures that we could never imagine. In our rest and recreation: we have played, we have rested, we have traveled, we have feasted and we have pictures and videos to commemorate your myriad of gifts to us. Oh, how we long for this season. We plan our vacations, fire up our BBQs, lay in our hammocks, swim in our pools, and rekindle relationships when time is not pressured.

We would be remiss in not expressing our gratitude for a successful Vacation Bible School last week. We relish, as we are sure you do, the joy these young hearts possess. Thank you for each child who you entrusted to us this past week. We thank you for the creativity expressed by our leadership in communicating the wonder of your grace and love. We pray that the seeds we have sown in these young hearts will flourish and bring much fruit to your kingdom. May the CDs purchased, and played often at home or in the family car, of the VBS songs, continue to reinforce the message of hope that the gospel contains.

Thank you, O God, for every blessing and every rich gift, whether big or small, that summer brings to us. But as the retailers are now reminding us, the return of the fall is fast approaching. We pray for our teachers today, as they begin to prepare for a busy year of school. We pray for those men and women who drive the school buses safely every day, that education can continue for children not close enough to walk to classes. We pray for the support staff in our schools who handle administration and keep facilities clean and functioning.

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We pray for our school board, that includes our own Eva Dixon, as they manage dwindling resources and challenging problems with aging facilities and growing needs for specialized programs.

We pray for the churches of our community, that will also be gearing up for a busy year of programs and activities. We certainly pray that the good news of Christ will be shared with many who need hope. We lift to you the efforts to feed the hungry, cloth the naked and house the homeless. We are grateful for the way you have spoken into the hearts of this community to reach out to the migrant farm workers so they may feel welcomed and appreciated during their time among us.

For our own fellowship here at First Baptist, we ask for your leadership and the creative presence of your Holy Spirit to infuse the programing, and ministry efforts we undertake in your name. May we experience great joy at seeing lives touched by your grace. May we discover anew how precious it is to dwell together in a spirit of unity. When challenges come before us, as they most certainly will, fortify our faith. As your words reminded us today, being your people is sometimes not easy. Daily we have to make decisions that either communicate our allegiance to you, or make others question how faithful we really are.

With summer, we have not been together much the last few weeks, and we know among us today or connected to us are brothers and sisters who are coping with poor health, life transitions, or grief. Some of us have long desired for a compassionate shoulder to lean on, a word of comfort or just to feel we are no longer alone. Thank you, O God, that as lovely as the summer season is, and was grateful as we are for vacations and periods of rest; we now can answer your call to reconvene and renew our friendships with our brothers and sisters and fortify ourselves with your love to welcome and embrace those new to our family, and how they will go from strangers to dear friends in no time at all.

BENEDICTION: May God lift each sagging shoulder and strengthen every weakened knee. May God straighten the path for each tired foot and turn to peace every embattled heart. May God so bless each merciful word and magnify every faithful deed that each root of bitterness can be pulled from the earth and the tree of life planted in its place.
Amen.

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Luke 12:49-56

“Rough Stuff”

To begin our deliberations on this Gospel lesson today, I wanted to, as a public service, share with you some actual warning labels you can find on products. Just like the companies that place these warnings on their products to avoid lawsuits, I share these with you so you cannot blame me. After all, you have been warned. For example: on a hair dryer there appears this critical warning, “Do not use in the shower.” I am not sure how you wash and dry your hair at the same time, but so be it.

On a curling iron these words appeared, “For external use only”. On toner cartridges for your printer you may find the following, “Do not eat toner.” On a can of pepper spray appears these cautionary words, “May irritate eyes.” I would hope so, if I ever needed pepper spray. On a Frisbee, we read, “May contain small parts.” On a toilet cleaning brush, “Do not use orally.” “Please keep out of children”, are the actual words found on the package for a butcher knife.

Where do you think we find these words, “Warning: has been found to cause cancer in mice?” That’s right, it is found on a package of rat poison. On a package of Midol relief tablets for PMS we read, “Warning: do not use if you have prostrate problems.” On a shipment of hammers there appears, “Not for human consumption.” On a Swedish chainsaw we find, “Do not attempt to stop blade with your hand.”

One of my favourites is on a package of “Nytol” where we have the warning, “May cause drowsiness.” On Arm and Hammer cat litter we find the helpful advice, “Safe for use around pets.” On a .22 caliber rifle, engraved on the barrel we read, “Warning: misuse may cause injury or death.” And finally, where do you think I found these words, “Warning: may contain nuts.” That’s right, on a package of peanuts.

Why do companies find it necessary to put such ridiculous warnings on their products? Are there people out there who actually believe it is a wise thing to try and stop a chainsaw blade with their hand? Are there people out there who look at a toner cartridge for a laser printer and say to themselves, “Gee, I wonder what wine goes with the magenta cartridge?” Come on, are people that stupid.

Well, it appears they are, otherwise manufacturers wouldn’t find it necessary to write instruction and safety manuals longer than “War and Peace.” People will try almost anything out of curiosity, or in an attempt to use something for a purpose it was never intended. Like one I read about on a microwave, “Not for use in drying pets.” Who puts fluffy in the microwave to dry him off?

Well, guess what, Jesus did not think we were very astute thinkers either. This whole twelfth chapter of Luke has in it a tone that sort of communicates that Jesus is stating the obvious. That what he is warning about and urging people to see, is as plain as the very noses on our faces. In the section I read for you today, Jesus is placing a huge warning label on his ministry, as if to say “You can’t say I didn’t warn you.”

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This ministry that Jesus represents, and talks about, is going to be tougher on us than we might be prepared to accept. The work and calling of Christ on our lives is revolutionary. It will shake the very foundations of our lives. In encountering Christ and in following him, our lives will never, ever, be the same again. If we follow Jesus, we need to read the warning label. Have you ever paid attention to those television ads for medications? The ads show people living these great lives because they took a certain little pill.

It all looks so hopeful and carries such promise, that is until they throw in at the end of the commercial, “Side effects may include, heartburn, diarrhea, dry mouth, headaches, leg cramps etc.” I may be wrong here, but the cure almost seems worse than the disease. Jesus warns us, “If you follow me, you will face trouble.” There are side effects to experiencing the grace Christ offers.

Some people, maybe most people, will discover that faith carries with it, consequences to: our families, our employers, our neighbours and of course to ourselves. The joy, peace and love we experiences in knowing Christ, will be misunderstood by those closest to us. Families will be torn apart because one member becomes a believer, when the rest reject Christ. Those we work with, will misunderstand our ethical and moral behavior.

Those closest to us may charge us with being judgmental, or not being “one of the crowd”. People who still live in darkness will not understand our love and desire to remain in the light of Christ. They may even grow to hate us, including as Jesus suggests, our own family members. If you don’t believe me, there are countless stories in the bible and in this modern day, of believers who paid the ultimate price for their faith.

Every year in November, the church commemorates a Sunday called a Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church to remind us of those who have been martyred for their faith. Jesus’ point here is that he claims to be stating the obvious to anyone who will listen. These persecutions, and these divisions in families are all to be expected. In fact, we should be concerned if they don’t. Jesus reminds the crowd that they have no trouble watching the sky and knowing it is going to rain, so why can we not accept that trouble follows the faithful.

The issue really isn’t how we avoid trouble because of our faith, but rather what kind of an attitude we take into scary situations when our faith is questioned. In the movie called *Signs*, we meet the Hess family who live in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The Hess clan wake up one morning and find a 500-foot crop circle in the middle of their corn field. Graham Hess (Mel Gibson) and his two children, watch the TV news reports with growing alarm as crop circles are reported all over the world.

They also see on the TV, disturbing news footage about 14 unidentifiable lights in the night sky over Mexico City, and conclude, like the rest of the world, that an alien invasion is imminent. Graham Hess’ brother Merrill turns to Graham his older brother, a former pastor, who has lost his faith due to the untimely death of his beloved wife, and asks for some comfort. “Some people think this is the end of the world,” Merrill says, “Is it true? Do you think it could be?” “Yes”, Graham flatly replies.

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Alarmed by his brother's response, Merrill questions, "How can you say that?" "That wasn't the answer you wanted?" Graham asks. Full of fear, Merrill demands, "Couldn't you pretend to be like you used to be? (referring of course to when Graham was an active minister) Give me some comfort?" Graham explains, "People break down into two groups. When they experience something lucky, group number one sees it as more than luck, more than coincidence. They see it as a sign, evidence that there is someone up there, watching out for them.

Group number two sees it as just pure luck, a happy turn of chance. You can be sure that the people in group number two are looking at those 14 lights in a very suspicious way. For them, their situation is 50/50. Could be bad, could be good. But deep down, they feel that whatever happens, they're on their own. And that fills them with fear. But there are a whole lot of people in group number one.

When they see those 14 lights, they're looking at a miracle, and deep down they feel that whatever's going to happen, there will be someone to help them. And that fills them with hope. So, you have to ask yourself: what kind of person are you? Are you the kind that sees signs, and sees miracles? Or do you believe that people just get lucky? Or look at the question this way. Is it possible that there are no coincidences?"

This character played by Mel Gibson, hits the nail on the head. Is what happens to you just coincidence, just bad luck or good luck, or is something or someone else at work in your life? Is your faith only valuable to you as long as the sun shines and things are going well? Because Jesus is assuring us today, that on all of us some rain is going to fall and some it will be related to following him.

Could it be that claiming faith makes some issues in life more difficult to cope with? 'Why am I sick? Why is my marriage failing? Why can I not get a job? Why does my neighbour who is a scoundrel, get all the breaks?' Well, if you don't believe in God, then you are on your own. If God does not exist, there is no meaning in any situation you are facing. "That's just the way the cookie crumbles," we like to say.

All of life's significant moments, good or bad are, without faith in God, simply a matter of randomness, genetics, sociology or politics. Can you live with that? On the other hand, Jesus is saying that faith is pretty hard to live with as well. If we claim to believe, then why would God let these terrible things happen to me? That was the issue that Graham Hess faced when his wife died and he couldn't keep his faith.

Isn't it funny that we never complain to God when good things happen to us? We don't even think to thank him if we get a promotion or something wonderful happens. But boy, we sure like to blame him if things go wrong. Either approach to life is difficult, but let me argue, as Jesus is leading us, that if you truly think all of life is just a random series of events. That some unseen forces of fate, luck or what have you, determines our destiny; than what hope do you have? Everything in a life guided by this belief is: uncertain, without purpose and of course unfair.

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There is no ground to complain or pat ourselves on the back because, well everything is random. We know this to be true. The signs of purposeless lives are everywhere. It is portrayed in music, art, movies, television and in our nightly news casts. Without a point to life, why should we care about anything?

Why worry about violence among teens, poverty, and the Ebola crisis in Africa or a host of other problems? Without purpose to life we could shrug our shoulders and say, "Well, I guess they weren't as lucky as me". Are you content with that? Can you live with this approach to life? Can we not see the warning signs that reveal the emptiness of people's lives?

Does our faith have anything at all to say in the face of these signs, or do we crumple the moment something bad happens to us? The Apostle Paul, whose life was one of privilege and power, was completely turned upside down when he met Christ. He went from being Judaism's shining knight, to its most despised outcast. He was lashed, beaten, insulted, threatened, shipwrecked and all manner of indignities were committed against him, all because he claimed to follow Jesus.

So, what did Paul say about this, was he just unlucky, did he shake his fist at God? Not at all. In fact, while sitting in a prison cell, Paul writes these words to the Philippians, "*I have learned how to get along happily whether I have much or little. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength I need.*"

Why do we let so much of life, defeat us? Jesus warned us there would be days like this. The signs of trouble surrounding God's faithful are everywhere. I guess, as some people have, you could chuck any faith you have away, sulk in a corner, and write it all off as bad luck. Or perhaps, if you choose, you can embrace a choice that sees nothing as coincidence and learn to live as Paul did.

A number of years ago Norman Cousins wrote an editorial in Saturday Review in which he reported a conversation he had on a trip in India. He was talking with a Hindu priest named Satis Prasad. The man said he wanted to come to our country to work as a missionary among the Americans. Cousins assumed that he meant that he wanted to convert Americans to the Hindu religion, but when asked, Satis Prasad said, "Oh no, I would like to convert them to the Christian religion.

Christianity cannot survive in the abstract. It needs not membership, but believers. The people of your country may claim they believe in Christianity, but from what I read at this distance, Christianity is more a custom than anything else. I would ask that either you accept the teachings of Jesu in your everyday life and in your affairs as a nation, or stop invoking His name as sanction for everything you do. I want to help save Christianity for the Christian."

B. Clayton Bell, in *Preaching*, May-June, 1986.

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Content with whatever God sends my way. It will not be easy. No one, not even Jesus, said it would be. But it is the only way. Hear me again. It is the only way to find meaning, purpose and hope in this fractured world. It is time to stop being hypocritical in singing and speaking about how wonderful, caring and merciful God is, and then display to the world in the face of tragedy, that our faith has no depth and no strength.

The world is watching us; it is looking for a sign. Will it see in us the power of Christ or a people whose faith is nothing more than empty words? The choice is ours, for we have been warned that the journey of faith is no insulation from the harsh realities of life and may even make things worse for us, but in the end our Master will come, inspect his household and reward those servants who have truly lived faithful lives.