

Sunday November 3rd, 2019

PRAYER: O God of salvation, you are our hope! Yesterday your wisdom established the mountains; today your power stills the seas; tomorrow your peace will unite the peoples. This is our conviction-and this, our calling: that we should bear your wisdom and power and peace in a world stumbling in its folly, fainting in its weakness, succumbing to its violence. Endow us, O Lord, with the courage to walk in your way, the strength to stand for your cause, and the compassion to live out your will-not that we might be saved, but that, through us, you might save the world. 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.” (Deuteronomy 16:16-17)

PASTORAL PRAYER: O Holy Spirit of God, you are the voice that will never fail to sing, though all the world is silent. You are the feet that never fail to dance, though all the world is still. You are the eye that will never fail to watch, though all the world is sleeping. You are the mind that will never fail to reason, though all the world is senseless. You are the hand that will never fail to open, though all the world is selfish and you are the heart that will never fail to feel, though all the world is numb.

Thank you, Holy Spirit, for abiding in our midst, for moving us when we do not want to move and for slowing us down when we do not want to stop. Thank you for moving in ways that, though mysterious, do not frighten us away. We are a people often made small by the greatness of our fear. We shrink from conflict when conflict cries out for resolution. We flee from truth when truth demands expression. We run from change when change must come; change that will require us to be no longer who we have been, to do no longer as we have done, to say no longer what we have said, to believe no longer as we have believed.

O Comforter, remain among us, and we will rise above our fear. Instead of shrinking from disputes, we will join them until they are justly resolved. Instead of fleeing from the truth, we will pursue it until it is freely expressed. Instead of running from change, we will weigh it until it is fairly judged.

O Spirit, abide among us, and we will rise above all fear. We will become your voice, and though all else be silent, we will never cease to sing your song. We will become your feet, and though all else be still, we will never cease to dance your dance. We will become your eyes, and although all else be sleeping, we will never cease to keep your watch. We will become your mind, and though all else be senseless, we will never cease to seek your will. We will become your hands, and though all else be selfish, we will never cease to share your riches. We will become your heart, and though all else be numb, we will never fail to love your word. Amen.

BENEDICTION: Let us take heart and labour diligently for the reign of God. May the grace of God complete every good work through the power of faith, that we might praise God with our lips and glorify Christ with our lives. Amen.

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Luke 19:1-10
“Seeking to See Jesus.”

Christian writer and apologist Tony Campolo, loves to tell stories from his own life that underscores the truth he is trying to communicate. One such story comes from an experience he had on the streets of Philadelphia where Campolo lives and works. This incident occurred as Tony was walking along a downtown street. These are his words that are found in his marvelous book; *Let Me Tell You a Story*.

One day about the noon hour, I was walking down Chestnut Street when I noticed a bum walking toward me. He was covered in dirt and soot from head to toe. There was filthy stuff caked on his skin. But the most noticeable thing about him was his beard. It hung down almost to his waist and there was rotted food stuck in it. The man was holding a cup of McDonald's coffee and the lip of the cup was already smudged from his dirty mouth.

As he staggered toward me, he seemed to be staring into his cup of coffee. Then, suddenly, he looked up and he yelled, “Hey, mister! Ya want some of my coffee?” I have to admit that I really didn't. But I knew the right thing to do was to accept his generosity, and so I said, “I'll take a sip.”

As I handed the cup back to him, I said, “You're getting pretty generous, aren't you, giving away your coffee? What's gotten into you today that's made you so generous?” The old derelict looked straight into my eyes and said, “Well...the coffee was especially delicious today, and I figured if God gives you something good, you ought to share it with people!”

I thought to myself, “Oh, man. He has really set me up. This is going to cost me five dollars.” I asked him, “I suppose there's something I can do for you in return, isn't there?” The bum answered, “Yeah! You can give me a hug!” (To tell the truth, I was hoping for the five dollars.) He put his arms around me and I put my arms around him. Then suddenly I realized something.

He wasn't going to let me go! People were passing us on the sidewalk. They were staring at me. There I was, dressed in establishment garb, hugging this dirty, filthy bum! I was embarrassed. I didn't know what to do. Then little by little, my embarrassment changed to awe and reverence. I heard a voice echoing down the corridors of time saying “I was hungry; did you feed me? I was naked; did you clothe me? I was sick; did you care for me? I was the bum you met on Chestnut Street...did you hug me? For if you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me.”

This little story touches me on so many levels. Like many of you I wonder what I would have done. When I mentioned the coffee cup how many of you felt squeamish at the idea of sharing that man's coffee? However, I bet that most of us in this room saw ourselves in Tony Campolo's shoes and not that of the homeless man. It is a bit of a stretch for us to see ourselves as filthy, discarded, and left to relish in the quality of a cheap coffee.

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The same thing happened in the Zacchaeus story in the gospel of Luke. Most of the time when we read, hear, or have a sermon on this text, we think we are to take the view point of the Pharisees. That is so, we believe, so that we can be chastised by Jesus for our judgmental attitudes to others who are lost. What we miss is the point that all of us, Pharisees included, are “sons of Abraham”. All of us are in need of salvation.

All of us hunger and thirst for an encounter with Jesus. None of us is worthy to have that encounter, let alone have Jesus come and dine with us. Nevertheless, he does come to us, and calls us to join him. Jesus seeks to erase the distance between himself and all of us, whether we are: up a tree, across the river, down the block or wherever. Zacchaeus is one of my favourite stories in the bible, maybe because I too am vertically challenged.

I have even in my adult years found myself singing the little ditty I learn as a child in Sunday School, “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he. He climbed up into a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see. The Lord walked by and looked up in the tree and he said, “Zacchaeus, you come down! For I’m going to your house for tea. I’m going to your house for tea.”

However, as much as I have reflected on this story, I have failed to notice something very special that Tony Campolo’s story shone some light onto for me. What was the homeless man’s response to the good cup of coffee? What was Zacchaeus’ response to the openness of Jesus to dine with him? Both men reacted with generosity. When something good happened to them, they wanted to share with others.

Not only did Zacchaeus want his friends to meet Jesus, he also responded with not only repaying what he stole, but giving back four times what he swindled. It seems to me that grace has a way of sparking generosity. Today we talk about it as “paying it forward”. I think of it in terms of our hearts finally reacting to the world, the way it was intended by God. I recognize it appears there is a huge gap between a sip of coffee the homeless man offered, and the bags of money Zacchaeus gave away but is there really?

Does generosity that arises out of the grace of God even come with a price tag? I am sure that homeless man had hardly any money, so a cup of coffee was valuable to him. It was likely all he had to share, if he could find someone to share it with. Zacchaeus gave away his money in abundance. I don’t know if he was destitute after he gave back the cash, but the implication is certainly he wasn’t as rich.

Encounters with Jesus just seem to bring out a joy in people that they cannot help but want to share; even when that sharing is sacrificial. Perhaps you are familiar with an incident in the early church that the Apostle Paul documented for us in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5. It refers to the Macedonian Christians and their generosity.

Now I want to tell you, dear friends, what God in his kindness has done for the churches in Macedonia. Though they have been going through much trouble and hard times, their wonderful joy and deep poverty have overflowed in rich generosity. For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford but far more.

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And they did it of their own free will. They begged us again and again for the gracious privilege of sharing in the gift for the Christians in Jerusalem. Best of all, they went beyond our highest hopes, for their first action was to dedicate themselves to the Lord and to us for whatever directions God might give them.

Have we ever begged again and again to give to others or even considered it a gracious privilege? I don't think I have ever been at a gathering of Christians where they were tripping over each other to be generous? Instead we are likely more apt to hold back and count the cost. The point is that the amount of generosity is irrelevant. What truly matters is the heart of the one seeking to be generous.

Generosity and joy are the natural and expected outcome of a heart truly touched by the grace of God. Yet, as the Pharisees remind us in Luke 19, many God-fearing people, sincerely believe that the natural outcome of an encounter with God's grace is a ridged and austere life. Like the crowds that passed Campolo and the homeless man on Chestnut Street, or the Pharisees watching Zacchaeus, we observe generosity and we look and miss the joy of it and the power of it.

Who really was the "short sighted" person in Luke 19? Who was the short-sighted person on Chestnut Street? Maybe all of us. Despite ample evidence, we continue to doubt that grace can really change someone, maybe even doubt it can change us. We have come to think that generosity is a gimmick to gain something else; like when you receive a phone call telling you that you have won a week's stay at a vacation location, only to discover it is a time share project looking to talk you into buying.

We are skeptical of the power of grace, and so we question and we doubt. But what is really sad is how we question the power of grace in our own lives. We think we need to be cautious and practical. I thank God; Jesus was neither cautious nor practical. If he was, he would never have reached out to Zacchaeus, and he certainly would never have gone to Calvary. Grace, real grace, has maybe more than a hint of recklessness to it.

You see it all the time in scripture, in literature, and in real life. In scripture we have a woman throw caution to the wind to anoint Jesus in a Pharisee's home. In literature we read about people like Ebenezer Scrooge who throws his miserly approach to life out the window. In real life you have people who serve the downtrodden in this town with little resources, and sometimes in the midst of criticism by those who see their work as unnecessary, or detrimental to Simcoe.

So much of what Christ is doing in this world doesn't seem logical, sensible, or sustainable and yet it works. Why would Jesus stop, and have a meal with a notorious tax collector, when he knew the religious authorities would grumble about him? Why would Tony Campolo drink from a dirty coffee cup, risking who knows what in terms of germs? Why would good people, open: their homes, their wallets, their hearts with no promises that their efforts will make any difference.

It is grace: reckless, bountiful, sweet, precious and unlimited grace.

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I also noticed in the bible and in our lives that Jesus makes his grace personal. Have you noticed that? When Jesus approaches the tree in which Zacchaeus has perched himself, he doesn't say, "Hey you there, short guy, what do you want?" No! Jesus says, "Zacchaeus!" He uses his name. It is personal. I read a very unusual novel some time ago entitled *American Gods* written by Neil Gaiman. One of the things that comes up in the novel is a discussion about the overwhelming nature of human suffering.

The main character Mr. Wednesday is explaining to the other main character, Shadow, the prevalent way people deal with human suffering.

No Man, proclaimed Donne, is an island, and he was wrong. If we were not islands, we would be lost, drowned in each other's tragedies. We are insulated (a word that means literally, remember, made into an island) from the tragedy of others, by our island nature, and by the repetitive shape and form of stories...

Look, see the child's swollen belly, and the flies that crawl at the corner of his eyes, his skeletal limbs: will it make it easier for you to know his name, his age, his dreams, his fears? To see him from inside? And if it does, are we not doing a disservice to his sister, who lies in the searing dust beside him, a distorted, distended caricature of a human child.

And there, if we feel for them, are they now more important to us than a thousand other children touched by the same famine... We draw our lines around these moments of pain, and remain on our islands, and they cannot hurt us. They are covered with a smooth, safe, nacreous layer to let them slip, pear like, from our souls without real pain. (pg322)

We may take exception to such a cynical view of life, but we know it is true. There is so much misery out there, and maybe even in this room right now, that we find it difficult not to feel overwhelmed. The sad stories we hear are like gritty grains of sand that irritate us, and so we do begin to shield ourselves from the discomfort, like an oyster makes a pearl.

That is why charities like World Vision always try to show you specific profiles of children. You are more apt to respond if it is more personal. Jesus however, is all about making it personal. He frowns on any attempt to insulate ourselves from the world. "No person is an island" in God's kingdom. We are to spend and be spent for the gospel. When touched by Christ, like Zacchaeus, we cannot help but build bridges, heal rifts between people and bring joy to others.

Dr. Albert Campbell former pastor of Mt. Carmel Baptist Church used to tell a story about a time before the emancipation of slaves in the states. In those days, white folks had their seats on the main floor of the church, while African-American people were assigned seats in the balcony. There was a man named Frank, who constantly disrupted the services by shouting words of praise to God whenever the preacher said something that seemed extra good to him.

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Frank's white master was irritated by these constant interruptions during worship, so he told Frank that if he remained silent during the entire sermon, he would buy him a new pair of boots. Frank determined not to say a word in response to any good thing he heard from the pulpit, no matter how wonderful the preacher's declarations about God might be.

That Sunday it seemed that the preacher had some exceptionally good things to say about God and about what God had accomplished through Jesus. Poor Frank struggled hard to contain himself all during the service. Several times he almost forgot his promise to his master not to let go with a word of praise, but he kept his lips buttoned with image of those new boots that would soon be his.

Within his heart, however, there were shouts of Hallelujah! At one point, the preacher said something so incredibly wonderful that Frank just couldn't remain silent. He stood up and shouted at the top of his lungs, "Boots or no boots-praise the Lord!" How long has it been since we responded to God's grace just because we couldn't help it? How long since we just couldn't keep it in or hold back because of our encounter with God's amazing grace?

How long since the hard pearl like substance covering our hearts has been cracked open? How long has it been since we last saw Jesus? Saw Jesus in our own lives and Jesus in the lives of others. Well, take heart, because right now he is calling you by name, to come to him and join him and take him into your homes, your neighbourhoods, and your places of work and wherever else you may find yourself.

All so you can respond in joy and generosity to the grace Christ offers you.