

Sunday July 11th, 2021

CALL TO WORSHIP: O neighbours, have you not heard the news? The realm of God is drawing near! Mustard seeds are falling around us, scattered by the Spirit's hand! Come, let us tend and water them, and see that none is choked by thorns; Come, let us worship, and the seeds will grow tall, and even the birds shall build nests in the branches!

PRAYER: O God, we worship and praise you for your gift of redemption. In Christ you chose us before the world was created. You sent him to cleanse us of all our unrighteousness. He sacrificed himself for us that we should be blameless. Your grace surrounds us, and your peace dwells within us. Through Christ, who calls us and names us as your chosen people, we gather to praise you for your glorious grace. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: God of redeeming grace, have mercy upon us as we confess our sin. Charged to travel light, we overburden ourselves. Commissioned to preach repentance, we ourselves do not change. Cautioned to avoid violence, we are quick to confront others. Called to be reconcilers, we create divisions. As Christ sends us and equips us to serve him, cleanse us of abusing his trust and his name. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: Remember that we have redemption through Christ's sacrifice on our behalf. We have forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of God's grace. For God has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of God's will, "to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." Therein lies our assurance of pardon.

STEWARDSHIP: The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 4:2 that "Stewards are expected to show themselves trustworthy." Let us offer now our tithes and offerings and pray that we've have been trustworthy with what God has given us.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God, you have created us for yourself and for one another in a world of your own making. You are Lord above all lords and God above all gods; and you are our Lord and our God. You are the light unto our path; were it not for you, we would dwell in deep darkness. You are the strength of our life; were it not for you, we could not resist the powers of evil. You are the hope of our tomorrows; were it not for you, we would break under the load of yesterdays.

As we bow before you, dear Lord, refresh our memories. Let us not forget where we are, whose we are, or what the reason is for our gifts. Remind us that the land in which we dwell, whatever it be, is your land; that the people among whom we dwell, whoever they be, are your people; and that the gifts with which we are endowed, whatever they be, are bestowed to make us one in our worship of you and our service to one another.

We have repeatedly affirmed these most basic truths of our faith. Yet we confess, O Lord, that only rarely have we made them the truths of our lives. We have treated the land as if we were not its stewards but its owners. We have dealt with other people as if our relationships were of no concern to you. And we have handled our gifts as if they were intended to set people apart rather than bring them together.

We thank you, dear Lord, for your gift of these precious truths of faith and for all those who have sought to teach us their importance.

Sunday July 11th, 2021

For our disregard of their teaching, we ask your forgiveness. And we pray that you will give us hearts so attuned to your will that we will proceed to do it.

Remind us of our responsibility toward those who look to us for guidance. Let us not greet this responsibility with excuses.

Save us from the temptation to exaggerate our inadequacies and our obstacles. Let us dwell, instead, on your mighty acts wrought through people of equally unpromising circumstances—the slaves of Egypt, the harp player from Bethlehem, the Carpenter from Nazareth, the tentmaker from Tarsus. As we ponder the lives of those who shaped our faith, we see people who looked not within or around but up. They gave up the inward look, anxiously trying accurately to assess their strengths and weaknesses. They gave up the outward look, nervously trying to separate their friends from their foes. And they adopted the upward look, faithfully seeking to conform their will to yours.

O God, you commanded us to do unto others what we would have them do unto us. Enable us to give unto others the greatest gift others have given us. Face to face with the tensions within, troubles without, and threats on every side, help us follow the example of those who turned neither inward nor outward but upward. When our neighbours ask us for guidance, let us introduce them to our Guide.

BENEDICTION: O God, as you have brought us together in this place to ponder the mind of Christ, send us back into the marketplace to do his bidding. When we open our lips, let it be to speak your truth; when we open our hearts, let it be to spread your love; and when we open our hands, let it be to proclaim your welcome. Amen.

Sunday July 11th, 2021

Mark 6:14-29
“Regrettable Decision”

Back when I was a teenager, there was a pop singer named Meatloaf, who came out with a popular album that upset many a parent, entitled “Bat out of Hell”. On that album was a very popular song entitled “Paradise by the Dashboard Lights” in which a young man tried to “go all the way” with his girlfriend while in a parked car. In the heat of the moment, the young man promises to “love her ‘til the end of time”.

Then in a really funny twist, the song concludes with him singing, “Now I am praying for the end of time, because I don’t think I can spend another minute with you.” The song is funny, because it shows the folly of making a rash decision. Have you ever made a promise you regretted? Agreed to do something for someone, or be present at some event and then anguished that you wish your word wasn’t your bond.

So, what do you do? Do you keep your promise or renege on it? Children are always vexed with their parents or teachers, when they break their word. How many times have we heard a child whine, “But you promised!” The reasons for going back on our word with a child is irrelevant. All they care about is what they are missing out on.

In the book of Judges, we read about a man named Jephthah (Judges 11) who seems like such an unlikely candidate to lead Israel. Jephthah was a rough and tough man. He had a hard life, and most of his life he sought for acceptance from his own people. He was born as a son of the clan head named Gilead, but his mother was a prostitute, and therefore his half-brothers disowned him, and chased him away from his homeland.

While on his own, Jephthah recruited a large band of rebels, probably men who also had been rejected by their families and tribes; who became quite adept as warriors. His half-brothers meanwhile were coping with the Ammonites who sought to destroy them. The half-brothers came to Jephthah to ask for his help, offering to make him ruler if he could defeat the Ammonites. After some dickering, Jephthah agrees.

Jephthah at first, tried to negotiate a truce with the Ammonites, but that failed, and so war was inevitable. And as proof that God can use anyone to accomplish his purposes, the bible says that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he was able to recruit a sizable army to go to war against the Ammonites. But Jephthah was a brash man, impulsive by nature, and he did something very foolish.

Before his army faced the Ammonites, Jephthah made a vow, a promise to God, that if he was given victory over the Ammonites, he would sacrifice the very first thing that came out his front door to greet him when he returned home. Sure enough, Gilead defeated the Ammonites, and Jephthah returned home a hero. Remember the vow. Well, who should come out his door first to greet him, but his own daughter singing and dancing in joy over her father’s victory?

Jephthah was heartbroken, he tore his clothes in anguish, for he had made a vow before the Lord, a vow he had to keep. And yes, horrors of horrors he did sacrifice his daughter. On first read we wonder why God didn’t stop him as he did Abraham with Isaac.

Sunday July 11th, 2021

We wonder why Jephthah didn't go back on his word. We wrestle with the fact this was a different time, and a different culture. But in the scriptures, vows are taken seriously and must be adhered to.

A similar thing happened in our Gospel lesson today. It is an incident from the life of John the Baptist and Herod. Herod was son of Herod the Great, the king who killed the babies in Bethlehem. Herod Antipas had jailed John the Baptist. Why? Well, John was arrested because he spoke out publicly against the vile marriage of Herod to his sister-in-law. Herodias, Herod's illicit wife, was furious with John for essentially calling her an adulteress.

Herodias desired John dead for sullyng her name, which actually she did to herself. So, she hatched a plot on Herod's birthday. After Herod had drank a copious amount of wine, Herod's daughter also called Herodias, came out and danced, probably in a very provocative way. Flush with wine, Herod pleased with the performance, recklessly promises his daughter anything she wants, including up to half his kingdom. The girl was unsure, so she asks her mother what she should ask for, and here was the elder Herodias' chance.

"Ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter" and so she did. Herod was immediately sorry for his foolishness, but didn't want to break his word in front of his guests and be embarrassed, so word was sent to execute John, and bring his head on a platter. The point of both lessons today is that how we deal with our promises, and our vows, should never be taken lightly. However, the story in Mark about Herod, seems like an odd addition to the Gospel.

There is a great deal of detail here and one may wonder why? The simple answer is that John was greatly revered by the early church as the forerunner of Jesus, and so Mark sought to preserve the story of his demise, as in many ways he became the first martyr as a follower of Jesus. Regardless of why the story was originally preserved by Mark, it does push us into a place we would rather not go.

It calls us to account for our own foolish use of vows and promises. It demonstrates how making promises may seem prudent at the time, but it can come back to bite us. I am not sure if you are experiencing the same level of cynicism as I am of late. It seems that everyone is making grand promises these days that never seem to pan out. It is almost as epidemic as covid, isn't it? Advertisers promise that their product will change your life, or theirs is the best one out there.

A friend or family member promises to return the money they borrowed. A school mate promises to never reveal a secret, and yet it ends up on Facebook. Our town council announces a major infrastructure project, and promises it will be on time and on budget. Frankly, sometimes I wonder how they can keep a straight face saying such things. Politicians in general get us all steamed up with promises after promises that never materialize.

Earl Long, the former eccentric governor of Louisiana said of another politician: "You know how you can tell that fella's lying? Watch his lips. If they're moving, he's lying." (1001 Humorous Illustrations, p. 269) A person who shall remain nameless told me, that when he got married, they used the vows that had the words, "Love, Honour and humbly obey". He jokingly said that last promise was broken not two steps outside the church.

Sunday July 11th, 2021

The moment promises or vows enter the picture, someone gets disappointed or hurt. Now I get why Herod and Jephthah felt trapped into keeping their vows. Jesus said in Matthew 5:33-37 “Again, you have heard that the Law of Moses says, ‘Do not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you have made to the Lord!’ Then Jesus says this, “But I say, don’t make any vows! If you say, ‘By Heaven!’ it is a sacred vow because heaven is God’s throne. And if you say, ‘By the earth!’ it is a sacred vow because the earth is his footstool.”

And don’t swear, ‘By Jerusalem!’ for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. Don’t swear ‘By my head!’ for you can’t turn one hair white or black. Just say a simple, “Yes, I will’ or “No, I won’t,’ your word is enough. To strengthen your promise with a vow shows that something is wrong.” In other translations this last phrase is translated, “Or anything beyond this is from the evil one.”

Today people say ridiculous things like “I promise on my mother’s grave, or on my first-born’s head.” As kids we used to say, “Cross my heart and hope to die” or “pinky swear”. Jesus’ point is really quite simple. If people cannot depend on the truth of your yes or no, in other words your word; then no amount of dressing it up with swearing on something else, will make any difference, and may even make things worse.

Herod was not a man of integrity. He had proven that time and time again. He was reckless with his actions and his words. Therefore, Herodias could exploit him. Are we reckless when it comes to our word? Can people depend on our simple yes, or no? Are we people of integrity which means people of wholeness? Jesus was a person of integrity. His yes was yes and his no was no. He did not find it necessary to embellish his promises.

Jesus’ word never failed. What he said he would do he did, even down to dying on the cross. The story of Herod reveals to us the main reason people swear on things or people. The reason people make ridiculous promises that they later regret. Herod’s conscience had become distorted, or warped. We erroneously think that a conscience is the part of our soul that tells us right from wrong, but that is not entirely accurate.

Our conscience, actually, tells us what is right from wrong from our own perspective. A perspective that can be shaped by our experience and our beliefs. If for example, you believe the bible is the best way to live a good life, then you will most often let the bible influence your conscience. If, however, you think that your own opinion is what matters in this life, then your conscience will let you make selfish decisions without any discomfort.

Jesus in Luke 13:32 called Herod a “fox”, and yes, his intension was not to lavish praise on him. Just as today, the reference to a fox was to describe Herod as conniving; a trickster. Herod put on a public face, or persona that spoke of religious devotion and selfless public service, but it was a façade. His self-interest was what guided his conscience. His vow to Herodias was a way of manipulating his guests. A way of making him look magnanimous or generous.

Swearing on something, or someone, is a way of manipulating others opinion of us; to hide the true condition of our souls and conscience. The question comes down to who or what is influencing your conscience and your soul?

Sunday July 11th, 2021

And I think we are very adept at reading the truth of another's true conscience. Just think of any recent scandal.

You can guess that I am going to suggest to you that Christ should be the one to influence your conscience. In a simple way I could suggest you follow the advice in any situation to ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" But I should warn you that if you let Jesus influence your conscience, you will be at odds with the rest of the world. The rest of the world will not understand, agree or appreciate such a stance.

When Jesus is the one whispering to you in those decisive moments, you may truly feel like it's you against the world.

Tony Campolo tells the story of his friend Will Willimon who was serving as the dean of the chapel at Duke University when the tragedy of 9/11 occurred. Tensions began to run high between Christians, Jews and Muslims on the campus, so Will thought it would be good to have a forum in which a rabbi, an imam, and a Protestant clergyman, could talk about the way in which their respective religions would propose that people respond to the tragedy of the terrorist attack.

The Muslim imam explained that, according to the prophet Mohammed, aggression against a Muslim brother should be avenged. The rabbi pointed out that if a Jew were to attack a Muslim, it would be his responsibility to seek punishment-even capital punishment-against the Jew who did that.

To all of this, Will Willimon shrugged his shoulders and said, "You two make it very attractive to join either of your religions because that's the way I would want to respond to evil, but Jesus teaches me to do something that is very much harder. He tells me to love those who would do these evil things, and to forgive those who would commit such horrible acts." (Stories to Feed Your Soul, p. 42) If the response that comes to you is impulsive, and fits in with the world's expectations, I can almost guarantee it didn't come from Jesus.

If your response to a difficult situation comes easily to you, it likely didn't come from Jesus. Jesus told us that if we follow him, it would be a narrow road. It will require sacrifice as we pick up our crosses.

When I was a kid and loved to watch cartoons, the animators would often depict a character faced with a making a moral decision as having a little angel on one shoulder and a little devil on the other, both of whom looked like the one with the dilemma. It was a cute and effective way to portray the wrestling match we often have in our own consciences. In each instance of this animation technique, the same question prevailed.

Who, or what, is influencing your decision? We can make promises and make oaths and swear on bibles or whatever, but that doesn't make us people of integrity if we are following the wrong person. Unless Jesus guides our conscience, everything we promise is tenuous and fragile at best. And if Jesus is not guiding your conscience, I guarantee that your decisions will almost certainly be regrettable ones.