

Devotions for the Week of the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – July 12-16, 2021

Monday of Pentecost VII – Prayer of the Week

O Lord, You granted your prophets strength to resist the temptations of the devil and courage to proclaim repentance. Give us pure hearts and minds to follow Your Son faithfully even into suffering and death; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

He had finally walked away from that marriage. It was not healthy. Neither he nor his wife really knew how to do this marriage thing very well. They fought a lot. There had been infidelity. He had tried. She had tried. Now they had failed.

He sat in my office and explained in excruciating detail what had happened. But his explanation had a very specific goal. He wanted me to approve of it. He wanted me to tell him that he had done the right thing, or at least the only reasonable thing that he could have done. He wanted me to say that it was alright, and he should not pay too much attention to that niggling doubt which lurked in the back of his mind as he fell asleep at night.

But it was not alright. He should pay attention to the shriveled voice of his conscience which was trying to break through to him. His heart was broken. Everything was broken in this situation. It was not how God wanted this marriage to end. God envisioned them being parted only by death. God could have blessed even a poorly constructed marriage and made it wonderful. But His Spirit is gentle and can be thwarted. They each had loved themselves too much to let that Spirit have His way with them. It was time to repent of many things, to come to the Lord in a tearful admission of weakness and failure. Could this man do that, or could he only hear from me that which he had come to hear: an approval of his divorce which he hoped would make that voice go away?

We prayed in this prayer on Sunday for courage to proclaim repentance. Pray today for your pastor as he is called to proclaim repentance in this conflicted and strange world in which we live. Have you noticed how the only sin which most people can acknowledge is to have even a whiff of criticism for what our grandparents all agreed was a sin?

Tuesday of Pentecost VII – Amos 7:7-15

⁷This is what he showed me: behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said,

“Behold, I am setting a plumb line
in the midst of my people Israel;
I will never again pass by them;

⁹ the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

¹⁰ Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹ For thus Amos has said,

“Jeroboam shall die by the sword,
and Israel must go into exile
away from his land.””

¹² And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, ¹³ but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

¹⁴ Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, “I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. ¹⁵ But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.

I am rather proud of this table I built. My computer is sitting on it right now as I type these words. It seats six comfortably and expands to receive a couple of leaves. We have squeezed ten or more around it when company has come. But it is not quite square. When you pull the table top apart to insert the leaves or when you push it back together, the mechanism, a geared thing I purchased, howls. It sounds like some large ungulate is in great distress. A moose is being attacked by wolves in my dining room. My daughter, whose bedroom is on the main floor not far from the dining room, has told me that I do not need to do that while she is sleeping.

God has put a plumb line to the wall of Israel. A plumb line is a merciless measure. There is no tolerance for or margin of error. It is either straight or not. The plumb line of God's justice has revealed Israel to be a crooked wall. The only thing to do in that situation is tear it down. A lot more is at stake than my daughter's sleep. A crooked wall will eventually be a catastrophe. The people in Florida have seen that recently as they pick through the rubble of a fallen condominium to retrieve bodies. Built-right saves lives.

Amos' audience did not want to hear that. The priest of Bethel and the king of that time just wanted to ignore the problem. God would not ignore the problem. In truth, Jeroboam did not see the problem. He presided over a period of unprecedented prosperity in ancient Israel. But as Amos had earlier noted, not everyone participated in the good times. The poor man was sold for a pair of sandals while the wealthy women, Amos calls them the fat “cows of Bashan,” reclined on ivory couches and demanded another mixed drink of their servants. Who made your shoes? Look at the label; it will tell you where they are from. Was it a poor man or woman working in slave-like conditions in some distant country? Have we sold that person's life for a pair of cheaper sandals? Peel back the veneer of our prosperity, does a loud cry ascend to God for justice?

Wednesday of Pentecost VII – Psalm 85:(1-7) 8-13

- LORD, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
- ² You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you covered all their sin. Selah
- ³ You withdrew all your wrath;
you turned from your hot anger.
- ⁴ Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation toward us!
- ⁵ Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?
- ⁶ Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?
- ⁷ Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,
and grant us your salvation.
- ⁸ Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;
but let them not turn back to folly.
- ⁹ Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,
that glory may dwell in our land.
- ¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.
- ¹¹ Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.
- ¹² Yes, the LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
- ¹³ Righteousness will go before him
and make his footsteps a way.

The governor has lifted all the pandemic restrictions in our state for churches and most other places people gather. One still must wear a mask to visit the doctor or ride the bus. We are wondering what to do about some of our practices of the before-time, the days before the pandemic changed so much. What of that moment when our little congregation would turn to one another to greet each other in the peace of the Lord? Hugs were exchanged and gentle words of welcome and peace were whispered in one another's ears. Are we ready to do that? What if one of us is and the other is not? Do we designate part of the nave as a hug-free zone? "If you want to hug each other during the sharing of the peace, sit on the west side of the aisle. If you don't, please find a seat on the east side."

Verse 10 of this psalm says something amazing: Steadfast love and righteousness meet, righteousness and peace kiss each other. Read those words carefully. The first part of the couplet is not surprising. Love and faithfulness sound like they belong to each other. The second half, however, should bring us up short. Over the past year the streets of downtown Portland have seen marches and riots in which people have with great righteous indignation been anything but peaceful. We are in a moment when it feels like righteousness is a call to violence and destruction. The rioters in Portland, the mob who stormed the capital, the scenes of statues being pulled down across the land all make this line in the psalm seem so improbable, more improbably than an embrace in church after COVID.

But notice, as well, the rest of this psalm. The people are exhorted to repent of sins and await the gracious visitation of God. He speaks peace and causes righteousness to spring up from the ground. It is hard to see a day when we will hug in church again. It is hard to see a day when peace and righteousness kiss. But God has no limitations. His grace will work them both.

Thursday of Pentecost VII – Ephesians 1:3-14

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

We are all familiar with the concept of adoption and so we hear Paul speak of our adoption as sons by God and imagine cherubic infants being welcomed into the arms of loving parents. There is nothing wrong with this image and it may indeed tell us something about what God has done. But it is not really the image Paul has in mind here. In the ancient world adoption was normally an adult event. Childhood mortality was high. It was common for a wealthy family to find itself in a position of having no heir. At that point, many would find a reputable second or third son of another family, usually of a lower social stratum, and adopt that person as an adult. We cannot know how prevalent this practice was; there was, after all, no demographic data collected. At the

same time, of the first five Roman emperors, Augustus - Nero, four were adopted as adults to become heirs of a childless father.

Roman law was rather specific about something here. When one was adopted, one had to renounce any claim on the inheritance of your birth family. You could not legally be the son of two fathers and inherit from them both. Being adopted meant choosing to become the heir of the new family and formally renouncing the inheritance of the other family. We have a vestige of this in the baptismal service to this day. The baptized candidate is asked to renounce the devil, his works, and all his ways. That line is right out of Roman adoption proceedings.

In the rest of this letter, which we will hear for the next five weeks in church, Paul will be calling us out of darkness and out of the dismal inheritance of this world and its ruler. We have renounced that inheritance of scale-balancing and vengeance taking. We have renounced the inheritance of division and enmity. We have renounced the inheritance which brings us only bitterness, loneliness, and finally death. We have become the heirs of life itself. God has made us his child.

Friday of Pentecost VII – Mark 6:14-29

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." ¹⁵ But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." ¹⁷ For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, ²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. ²² For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." ²³ And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." ²⁴ And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." ²⁵ And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶ And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. ²⁷ And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison ²⁸ and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

It just did not seem fair. She had been a stalwart member of my parish for years, one of the pillars whom I could always depend upon. She had adult developmentally disabled children, who needed their mom. She was a good and faithful servant of God. How could she now, suddenly, be dying of cancer?

John the Baptist died because a pretty girl danced. Can you imagine anything less fair and sensible? I can only compare it to sitting in a hospital room with my dying friend and holding her hand, helpless to ease her pain. The king did not want to kill John. His wife was not so fond of him because he made her very uncomfortable about her current marriage, but the king had not taken his life. Then the pretty girl danced, and he made a foolish promise, and John was killed.

This world sometimes does not make sense. This account of John's demise falls immediately between the account of Jesus sending out his disciples two by two and their return. It is not an accident that Mark tells this story here. We too are sent out into this world to bear witness to Jesus. We meet apathy, indifference, opposition, even persecution. Much of it does not make sense. Do not be surprised at that. God's kingdom, the forgiveness of sins, the love of God for you and the rest of the world in Christ, does not make sense to the world. These two kingdoms operate on diametrically opposed logical bases. They do not understand each other. God's kingdom, however, does prevail in its time. John shall rise to new life and the banality of his death shall be overshadowed by the outpouring of God's gracious kingdom and no one shall oppose it.