

Devotions for the Eighth Week after Pentecost: July 19-23

Monday of Pentecost VIII – Prayer of the Week

Heavenly Father, though we do not deserve Your goodness, still You provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your gifts, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

“What have you ever done for me!?” she screamed. Then she turned away from her parents and stormed out of the house in which she had been raised, wearing the clothes her parents had given her, started the car they let her use, and drove off in a pique.

The scene above is really a montage of several incidents I have experienced firsthand and second-hand as people have related them to me. Sometimes they were the parents telling the story. Sometimes it was the young person, now somewhat older and wiser, who shamefacedly related this incident. Gratitude is not a natural posture for human beings. It must be learned and taught. Its absence often makes us bitter, sad, and defensive. Being an ingrate also makes us very hard to live with and isolates us. I know a man who can only see the failures of his parents who have never stopped loving him. No, they were not perfect, but he is not perfect either. For all the validity of his observations these observations miss a much larger and more important point. They love him. He should be grateful to them before all else, and that posture should color every interaction with them.

We pray in this prayer that God teach us gratitude for all God’s benefits. When we get bogged down in the pedestrian lives we lead, when we are in the midst of difficult things, or when we face large challenges, I find that gratitude is a great blessing from God. It does not take away the problems, but it does put them into a perspective. The Lord who has blessed me hitherto will not abandon me now. I do not know what will happen, but I know that God’s love will be mine no matter what comes. Thank You God!

Tuesday of Pentecost VIII - Jeremiah 23:1-6

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD.

²Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. ³Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD.

⁵“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’

81 years ago, in the summer of 1940, Charlie Chaplin released his first non-silent film. He had not made a film for years, but he was on a mission to get this done. The film is “The Dictator,” a lampoon of Hitler. Born only four days apart from Hitler in 1889, Chaplin also bore a striking resemblance to the German despot, a resemblance he is not afraid to capitalize on in the film. He plays two parts in the film, one a Jewish barber who has awoken after a long coma only to find that he is living in a ghetto and the dictator himself. The two men look exactly alike, which is what makes the film work. Needless to say, the film did not play in Germany in the summer of 1940.

Did you hear what Jeremiah is doing at the end of this passage? The king at the time was named Zedekiah. Like many Hebrew names it has a meaning in Hebrew. Michael means “who is like the Lord” and Elijah means “The Lord is God.” Zedekiah means “The Lord is our righteousness.” That was the king’s name. He was not born with it, but had chosen it for himself when he began to rule, much like popes choose a new name when they begin their papacy. But Jeremiah looks ahead to a day when the king will bear the name and live up to that name. They will call him that because he lives it. Jeremiah did not get many invitations to the Palace for dinner.

We often are given to see the failures of people. Sometimes we look no further than the mirror to see them. Jeremiah, however, points us to one who will gather the lost remnant of Israel. David’s righteous branch who executes justice and righteousness in the land. God will see to it that this applies to all. None will be missing. The people will dwell securely. Of course, we are talking about Christ. He is God Himself come to gather the people. He executes his justice and righteousness with every forgiveness spoken in his name. The day will come when his righteous kingdom completely displaces this broken and sinful world in which we labor and that is all we will see. His name is also Zedekiah for he has made this true: The Lord is our Righteousness. He is our forgiveness and life and so much more.

Wednesday of Pentecost VIII – Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

³ He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

“I don’t know what to do,” the young woman admitted to me. She was on the verge tears. She sat in her professor’s office, discussing a test which had not gone well. It was not just her religion class which was challenging her. She had believed her school counselor and the rest of society which had told her that she could do whatever she wanted. They had told her that every door was open to her. They urged her to find her passion and pursue it. You likely know this rhetoric. You may even have repeated it yourself a few times as you talk to young people. I have and regret it.

From the perspective of this middle-aged professor, she did indeed have many options. He might have even been a little envious of the opportunities which lay before her. But she did not see it that way. She was smart enough to do well. Her academic struggles in school were not due to a lack of native ability. There was something else. We had laid upon her a burden of charting a course in life, a burden which she was ill-equipped to bear. When we told her to pursue her passion, find what she wanted to do, etc., we were heaping up the load. She was at the breaking point.

Read the first verses of this very familiar psalm again. Do you hear what the Lord is doing for David and us? He leads us. He leads us to quiet waters and green pastures. He leads us to paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. He leads us. The world does not like being led, or at least it valorizes a self-determined life. There is a part of me that wants to be the autonomous master of my destiny. But the world’s vision is a lie. Jesus leads to good places; we are not foolish to follow him. Take a few moments today, indeed every day, to ask Him where he, the Good Shepherd, leads you. It means losing some control of your life, but sin has made me a very poor navigator of life’s choices. We all need some guidance. Listen to what He says and follow Him. He is a Good Shepherd.

Thursday of Pentecost VIII – Ephesians 2:11-22

¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3 both look forward to a day when peace comes, when swords are reshaped into ploughs and spears become pruning hooks. Those words are engraved on a wall in the plaza outside of the United Nations building in New York. I too look forward to that day when all wars will cease. Alas, that day has not come. We still train young men and women for combat. It is the wiser course of action to do so in this dangerous world. I wish it were not so.

The UN and before it the League of Nations have not vouchsafed our peace. At best they have mitigated some conflicts and brought help to suffering people. But real peace, the peace Isaiah saw, will have to come from somewhere else. Paul knows it in this passage. Jesus is our peace (vs. 14). In Paul’s day that mean that Jews and Gentiles no longer had to observe the distinctions which had obtained before. Christ had broken down the dividing wall. But Christ’s kingdom is still breaking down walls. He is still reconciling people through his cross and killing hostility.

I met a man a while ago who had hurt me years before. I had rather dreaded running into him, but I knew the day would probably come. The Synod is not that large. In those days between, when we were not given to see one another much, if at all, I regularly had to remind myself that Jesus had died for him too, had forgiven this sin, and I did not need to be burdened by it anymore. I could let Jesus take care of it. That was hard to do, but I am glad I did. We saw one another and spoke words of apology and embraced. We are not close. He is neither my friend today nor is he my enemy. He is another person for whom Jesus died. Together we are being built into one building, a temple for the Holy Spirit. I am glad to be joined with him in that building. We have peace.

³⁰ The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. ³⁵ And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. ³⁶ Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” ³⁷ But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” ³⁸ And he said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” And when they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” ³⁹ Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. ⁴¹ And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. ⁴² And they all ate and were satisfied. ⁴³ And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. ⁴⁴ And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.

“What would it take for you to believe in God?” I remember one my more astute friends posing that question to an unbeliever in our little group. We talked about that for a little while. We wondered if a miracle would do it. At the time I thought it would. I did not understand miracles at that point in my life. I think I misunderstood faith as well. I saw miracles as proofs and faith as some sort of an assent to a logical argument. Having witnessed a few miracles myself in my ministry, I have come to see them to be something else. Miracles do not remove the need for faith, they demand faith of us.

Imagine yourself to be one of those disciples. You look over the massive crowd, thousands of people, and you know that they are getting hungry. Hungry people can get irritable; there is a neologism for that: hangry. You urge Jesus to cut short the sermon and let these people go so they can get something to eat before it is too late. But Jesus asks you to feed them. You do the computation. In today’s dollars, 200 denarii would be about \$20,000, or about \$4 per person for lunch. That is close to what it would cost. Jesus asks what you have, and you bring him the pitiable five loaves and two fish which you had planned to eat yourselves.

Jesus blesses and breaks the bread, hands the five loaves and two fish to you, and tells you to feed them. Turning around and facing that hungry crowd took faith on the part of the disciples. It would not have happened if they had not believed Jesus. Without faith, the disciples should have looked at Jesus and declared him to be mad and cruel to set such a meal before thousands. But they did turn around and they did feed the hungry that day with a meal for which no one labored. In a blessed moment, the curse of Genesis 3 was set aside. They ate not by the sweat of their brow, but by the grace of God.