

Devotions for the Sixth Week after the Pentecost – July 5-9

Monday of Pentecost VI – Prayer of the Week

O God, Your almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy, grant us the fullness of your grace that we may be called to repentance and made partakers of Your heavenly treasures; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Your and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

She wanted to make him pay. I think we have all been there, hurt, outraged, and powerless to exact the vengeance we wanted. She really wanted to make him pay. He had betrayed her trust and her life was being consumed by her hurt. She could not stop talking about it, soliciting the agreement of her friends against him. But it never really got better, even when they agreed. The brokenness of heart was still there. She dreamed of settling the score, of ruining him as she felt he had ruined her. Maybe then, she hoped, she would have some relief.

For those of us who watched this transpire, it was also painful. The once cheerful and good friend became more and more bitter. He had done something wrong and there was no excusing it. But did he and his betrayal have to own her like this long after he had left her life? His cruelty just did not let go of her. Or did she not let go of it?

I met her again some years later and things were different. I was hesitant to bring it up, but she finally did. She had grown weary of carrying around the weight of her hurt. It had consumed her and made her difficult to be around. She could see it, but she could not see clear to rid herself of the burden. Finally, she offended one of her last friends. It was her fault and her friend held her accountable to what she had done. She choked out an apology and her friend then did the unthinkable. She forgave her and in that moment of her own vulnerability this friend told her that she could forgive the one who had hurt her so long ago. Her friend did not want to carry around a burden of hurt and anger against her. Jesus had died for it. He had died for that other hurt too.

God's almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy. That is a very deep truth about God. We are primed by Hollywood to imagine that great power means blowing things up or looking like Superman, Godzilla, or some other fantastic thing. But God's almighty power was shown in Jesus dying for sins. We get to participate in that power, we all have a super-power of sorts. We are invited by God to forgive sins and thereby partake in heavenly treasures. We can repent of our own sins and be forgiven ourselves, and that enriches us to forgive our neighbor too. It is the fullness of God's grace for you.

Tuesday of Pentecost VI – Ezekiel 2:1-5

And he said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you."² And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.³ And he said to me, "Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day.

⁴The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD.’ ⁵ And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.

I had considered several Calls at this point in my ministry and thus it was not a strange thing to receive a telephone call from a congregational chairman along with another officer, telling me I had been elected Pastor of a parish. This conversation, however, was different. The men on the phone with me sounded disappointed. Indeed, as we spoke, they actively discouraged me from visiting to meet the congregation.

It came out, as I learned more about the call, that the congregation was deeply divided. All the folks who almost never came to church had shown up for the voters meeting and voted for me instead of the candidate the congregational officers wanted to elect. I was the protest vote. I simply was not that other guy, so one party rallied around my name. The chairman was quite clear. I had won that election by one vote. The congregational leadership did not want me there. They had not gone through the regular formality to make the vote unanimous.

The district president was gracious enough to take my phone call and talk about this situation. Unlike to the congregational leadership, he admitted that he in fact wanted me and not the other candidate. His words sometimes still haunt me. He said that this was a valid call and I needed to pray about it and ask what God wanted me to do and not pay too much attention to this congregation. He then reminded me of Jonah. The congregation was on the gulf coast. He said, “Phil, there are some very large fish in that Gulf of Mexico.”

God calls Ezekiel in this reading before us. I cannot imagine a more discouraging call vision. God as much as admits that Ezekiel’s mission will not succeed. The people are stubborn, and they are a rebellious house. It is a pattern baked into their very being. And yet the Spirit of God comes into Ezekiel and stands him on his feet and fills him. Ezekiel’s mission would go to great lengths to get the message across. His whole life would become a sort of prophecy. Despite the gloomy call, Ezekiel later records that the elders of the people of Israel did come to him and listen (Ez. 8:1 and 20:1). They might not have liked what they heard, but they came.

I declined that call. It was not a good fit for me in my vocations as pastor, husband and father. God has blessed me in that decision, but sometimes I wonder how He might have blessed me there. I have not taken any cruises on the Gulf of Mexico.

Wednesday of Pentecost VI – Psalm 123

To you I lift up my eyes,

O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

² Behold, as the eyes of servants

look to the hand of their master,

as the eyes of a maidservant

to the hand of her mistress,

so our eyes look to the LORD our God,
till he has mercy upon us.

³ Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.

⁴ Our soul has had more than enough
of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.

As a Mexican American, Lee Trevino was one of the first athletes to break the color barrier into the hitherto very segregated world of golf. Today we are not surprised to see a Tiger Woods or a Michelle Wie competing in the PGA or LPGA. It was quite a deal in the 1960's when the name Trevino started showing up on the leader board with the likes of Nicklaus and Palmer. In his second year on the tour, he won the US Open, garnering a sizeable prize. By 1970 he was the tour's leading money winner. With his winnings he bought a new home in a nice subdivision in his native Dallas.

He tells the story that one day, not long after he moved into his new home, he was mowing the lawn when a large Cadillac pulled up. The back window rolled down and the sweet drawl of a southern matron called Trevino to the curb. "How much do you charge to do yard work?" the occupant asked. She obviously thought he was the gardener, not imagining that he might the owner of this nice new home.

The psalmist says that his soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease and of the contempt of the proud. He looks to God for relief, like a servant looks to the hands of a master for relief. He awaits the mercy of God, but while he waits some, who believe themselves to be at ease, scorn him. He is weary of the contempt.

Trevino was gifted not only with excellent golfing skills, but also with a very quick wit. He sized up what was going on immediately and quipped, "Oh, the lady in this house (by this he meant his wife), she lets me sleep with her." He returned to his lawnmowing and chuckled as the Cadillac sped away. Trevino knew who he was. He was a champion of his sport. He was confident in that. The assumptions of this woman did not really bother him that much. The psalmist lifts his eyes to the heavens. He knows who sits on that throne. He knows the scorn and contempt will end one day. As Paul says, "our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself." (Philippians 2:20-21)

Thursday of Pentecost VI – II Corinthians 12:1-10

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³ And I know

that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses—⁶ though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The other day I was driving in Portland and I came up behind a car at a stop light sporting this bumper sticker “Don’t worry, God is in charge.” I understand the sentiment, but I am not sure that I always agree with the first part of the statement. Sometimes I think I need to worry a great deal because God is in charge. Paul brought his appeal three times to God for relief from the physical torment of the “thorn” he mentions here. God says that it serves a purpose and Paul should be content with that.

To my shame and Paul’s commendation, he deals with that better than I think I would. I still have a sense that being a believer, being on God’s team, should have some benefits and one of those benefits is that God helps you out. I would think this to be especially true if you are the Apostle Paul! Alas, it is not so, at least not like I imagine. God, in his loving wisdom, might see that the tornado, disease, accident, etc., which I fear and pray does not happen, in fact should happen. In short, I might suffer because God is in charge.

I will still pray for relief to God. He alone can relieve my greatest ailments and calm my gibbering fears, but I also must acknowledge that he might be saying yes to my prayer in my resurrection on the last day. For now, in this moment, my life is in complete service to his kingdom. Paul suffered and eventually was martyred for his confession of Christ. Through that life, death, and witness untold millions have been led to faith as they read his letters and the account of his ministry in Acts. I have no such grandiose plans for myself. But I am glad to be part of God’s kingdom and a small element in his good work in this world.

Friday of Pentecost VI – Mark 6:1-13

He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.² And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?³ Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.⁴ And Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his

hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.”⁵ And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them.⁶ And he marveled because of their unbelief.

And he went about among the villages teaching.

⁷ And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.⁸ He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts—⁹ but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics.¹⁰ And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there.”¹¹ And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.”¹² So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent.¹³ And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

In the first decade of the 13th century, a young Italian soldier named Giovanni, but everyone actually called him Francis, had a religious experience. He had a vision in which God asked him to rebuild his church. Taking that quite literally, he found a decrepit chapel in the countryside and started putting one fallen stone on top another. Within a few years, however, he came to realize that his call was to rebuild not the physical building but the temple in which the Spirit of God dwelt, the Church of God’s people.

He was sitting in church one day and heard this passage read in which Jesus sends out the 12. He thought Jesus spoke those words to him personally; once more taking it quite literally, he vowed never to own another thing but to wear and eat only what people gave him. From there he started wandering, preaching the Good News, and doing whatever acts of charity and love God led him to. Soon he gathered a few followers, men who admired Francis for his humility and piety. Within a few years, he had many more followers. In fact, within a few short years, Franciscans were found throughout Europe. They could be seen in most every city, their simple brown robes and bit of rope used as a belt set them apart from the increasingly wealthy Europeans. And everyone saw them and their devotion to Christ touched them.

The Franciscan movement would become one catalyst for a great time of spiritual revival in the medieval period. Many have argued that Martin Luther was continuing what Francis and others began hundreds of years earlier. We are experiencing a church in decline in North America. Is there a young man or woman somewhere who is listening to God call them to rebuild His Church? God rarely does the same thing two times in the same way. Don’t go looking for a young man or woman setting brick upon brick in an empty church in your neighborhood. But do be on the lookout for what God is up to in these days. Francis had given up everything, all his money, position, and popularity. He became a beggar. From nothing God made him into a force for change and renewal in the Church.