

Devotions for the Thirteenth week after Pentecost, August 23-27

Monday of Pentecost 13 – Prayer of the Day

Almighty and merciful God, defend Your Church from all false teaching and error that Your faithful people may confess You to be the only true God and rejoice in your good gifts of life and salvation; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

My ministry began over 30 years ago. That means I was privileged to serve the final days of the generation who fought in World War II. Most of them are gone now; although, a few remain among us. This text reminds me of talking to Ted; he had served as a corpsman, a medic, with the Marines in the Pacific campaign, on Iwo Jima and Okinawa. I had read of those battles and the fierce fighting that took place. When he told me that he had been there, I marveled at his bravery and that of his comrades. "Yes," he said. "But really you put your life in God's hands. He was going to get you through this, or he was going to raise you from the dead. Either way, your life is in his hands."

Ted now rests in Christ's very capable hands. Jesus promises that he will lose none of those whom the Father has given Him. We pray in this prayer that God keeps us from all error and false teaching so we can confess God to be the only true God and to rejoice in His gifts. In a very real sense, your god will always be that person or thing which will bring to you the greatest life and salvation. If you believe that to be science, then science is your god and science will get the very best you have to offer. But science will disappoint us. Medical science may in fact give us a vaccine which prevents the spread of COVID or a new treatment which prevents a heart attack, but eventually we all die. Science fails to save us. Ted was given to see this clearly as he stormed up the beaches of far away islands while an enemy tried to kill him. Ted's weapons, training, and everything else was a tool, but these things were not his God. That status, that role, belonged solely to the One whom no bullet or bomb could thwart. The enemy could blow up Ted, but God would put the pieces back together again and raise him from the dead. That is the One whom Ted and we confess to be the true God and in whose gifts we rejoice.

Tuesday of Pentecost 13 – Isaiah 29:11-19

¹¹ And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, "Read this," he says, "I cannot, for it is sealed." ¹² And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, "Read this," he says, "I cannot read."

¹³ And the Lord said:

"Because this people draw near with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me,
and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,

¹⁴ therefore, behold, I will again
do wonderful things with this people,

with wonder upon wonder;
and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,
and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”

¹⁵ Ah, you who hide deep from the LORD your counsel,
whose deeds are in the dark,
and who say, “Who sees us? Who knows us?”

¹⁶ You turn things upside down!
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay,
that the thing made should say of its maker,
“He did not make me”;
or the thing formed say of him who formed it,
“He has no understanding”?

¹⁷ Is it not yet a very little while
until Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest?

¹⁸ In that day the deaf shall hear
the words of a book,
and out of their gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind shall see.

¹⁹ The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD,

About the time that Isaiah wrote these words an ancient poet/philosopher/prophet (they were all the same thing in ancient times) among the Greeks observed that Thracian depictions of their deities had red hair and blue eyes which African depictions of the same pantheon of deities had dark hair and eyes. The philosopher concluded that the gods were in fact the creation of men. In more modern times we have heard much the same. God is a psychological projection of our needs or that religious faith served some evolutionary purpose.

Isaiah’s words speak to those who say such things in his and our times. “You turn things upside down!” He goes on to use an image of a potter and the clay but really say that the creator is the one who should be questioning our reality and not the other way around. We are bombarded with messages to the contrary in these faithless times. How many have not concluded that there is no God who will see what they do and so they do whatever pleases them. This seems normal and faith seems to be odd. How the world is upside-down!

Isaiah sees a day when mountainous and wooded Lebanon will be a fruitful field and the fruitful field will be a forest. In other words. The world will be turned right-side up! Then the deaf shall hear and the blind shall see, and the meek will obtain fresh joy in the Lord, for He will be plain for all to see. The strange situation we find ourselves in right now will be righted. We can all look forward to that day.

Wednesday of Pentecost 13 – Psalm 14

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."

They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds,
there is none who does good.

² The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man,
to see if there are any who understand,
who seek after God.

³ They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt;
there is none who does good,
not even one.

⁴ Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers
who eat up my people as they eat bread
and do not call upon the LORD?

⁵ There they are in great terror,
for God is with the generation of the righteous.

⁶ You would shame the plans of the poor,
but the LORD is his refuge.

⁷ Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!
When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people,
let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad.

I was taking a break the other day and browsing through YouTube when I came across a very frightening video of a foolish tourist trying to get close to a bison in Yellowstone park. There are more than one of these videos out there. You might have seen this on the news. It happened several years ago. Bison are very large, very fast, and not at all happy to have humans invading their personal space. This person obviously thought that this was a tame animal. It was not behind a fence or in a cage. It must be safe. The bison was not. She got thrown into the air and landed in a crumpled heap beside the boardwalk.

The psalmist today looks out at the world and has a similar reaction to mine when I watched this woman approach this massive animal. You are going to get hurt! Turn around, you fool! But the psalmist is not watching a woman approach a large land mammal of North America. He is watching evil people abuse the poor. They foolishly think that God is not noticing. They even may foolishly think that there is no God (see yesterday's devotion). But this is a terrible mistake. God is very real, and he is very aware of what they are doing.

The psalmist wonders if those who devour God's people like bread really have no understanding. Do they not see what they are doing? Do they not see the calamity that is about to befall them? With every evil deed they are winding the spring tighter and tighter on the trap which will crush them. The psalmist longs for the day that Salvation comes out of Zion and the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, when Israel and Jacob will be glad. It will be a day of great terror for those who oppress the righteous but a day of great joy for the oppressed.

Thursday of Pentecost 13 – Ephesians 5:21-33

²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

I never really knew him. He had descended into Alzheimer's before I arrived to be his pastor. He would say the Lord's Prayer with me and receive the sacrament. But there was not a lot of conversation happening. I was just one of a parade of strangers who crossed his path every day in the care facility. But I did know him in a sense. His wife told me about his wicked sense of humor, his prowess on the golf course, and how he was respected at work. All that was in the past. He knew he loved her, but he could not remember her name all the time. She visited him almost every day, her own health did not always allow it.

We hear Paul admonish us to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. He urges wives submit to husbands and husbands love their wives as Christ loved us. For too many people, his words are hard to hear. When very good things are corrupted, they often become very destructive and that is true about marriage. Paul is not telling us to submit to cruel and abusive spouses. Do not use his words to encourage someone to do that. He is envisioning something else, a mutual submission to one another, in which we allow our life to revolve around a center of gravity which is outside us both. It removes me from the middle of every picture and replaces it with us.

There is a beauty to the faithful devotion of my friend as she cared for her failing husband. It was hard sometimes. I know it was. She wept to tell me about it. But it was also good, and she would not have traded these days with him. This is the image of Christ and His Church, and it is the vision which God has always had for every marriage. Pray for marriages today, pray for your own if you are married. Pray for the marriages of the people you love. Pray that God bless and fill them with this mutually submissive love which bears beautiful witness to the love which Christ has for us all. Pray for the Church, which is the bride of Christ, that it too would find its delight in Him alone.

Friday of Pentecost 13 – Mark 7:1-13

Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, ² they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, ⁴ and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) ⁵ And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶ And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

“This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
⁷ in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’

⁸ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

⁹ And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)— ¹² then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

There is a man who lives down the street from me who is very concerned about the pandemic. He has significantly changed many of his life practices, carefully washing every item that comes into his house from the grocery or any other place. He is convinced that if he creates an antiseptic barrier around himself and his family that they will all be OK. The COVID virus will be held at bay.

We hear what Jesus says today in a different light since the dawn of modern medicine. We understand germs and immune systems and so we hear an admonition to wash our hands as wisdom and a good and healthy practice. Jesus is not opposed to washing hands, in fact, he is all for washing our hands to be healthy. I read an interesting study which suggested that one of the reasons members of monastic communities in the Middle Ages lived longer than other folks was because the Rule of St. Benedict required them to wash their hands before every meal. They did not get sick as often.

So, what is Jesus going on about with handwashing here, defending his disciples defiled hands? I think it may have something to do with my neighbor down the street. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were not concerned for the physical health of the disciples when they asked about this. They were concerned about their standing with God. They understood that this ritual washing was essential to that relationship. Jesus said that God alone is essential. Everything else is secondary. It might still be important and even have consequences; washing your hands is a

healthy practice, but it does not confer eternal life. My neighbor has come to believe that he can save his own life by his pandemic cleaning regimen. The Pharisees thought that they completed a ritual which had to be done or one was in mortal peril. Whether my neighbor's practice is a good idea or not, I cannot really say. We could have a discussion about its relative merits. I know, however, that even if he does not contract the virus, he will one day need God to raise him from a grave, whether he died of COVID or not.