

Devotions for the Fourteenth Week after the Day of Pentecost: August 30-Sept 3, 2021

Monday of Pentecost 14 – Prayer of the Week

O God, the source of all that is just and good, nourish in us every virtue and bring to completion every good intent that we may grow in grace and bring forth the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

He was not a nice man. If we want to be charitable, we might say he lacked certain social graces. If we want to be totally honest, we might say he was a jerk. There were people who avoided any interactions with him. He regularly told himself he liked that, but in truth he was lonely. Some people questioned his mental stability sometimes. He had driven a lot of people away, but he really did not know any other way. Perhaps he had once known gentleness and kindness, but it had been a long time. There was one bright spot in his life. A daughter, a little girl who had captured his heart in a way he never imagined could happen. He wanted what was best for her.

That desire and intent for his daughter's well-being eventually led him to enroll her in a Lutheran school, and, when she asked him to come, to darken the doors of the church for the Christmas program in which her first-grade class was singing. He cast a wary glance upward when he came in, both to see if the roof really would fall in as he had sometimes joked but also to avoid the eyes of the people staring at him. It went alright. Afterwards, while he waited for his daughter, people shook his hands and said they were glad he had come, even some folks who had never willingly spoken to him before. It was like he had a break from his past inside these walls. He brought his wife and little girl to church that next week. He wanted that sense again, that perception that he was not only defined by his abusive and angry past. The last I saw of him, he was serving on a board at Church, laughing with friends.

We pray in this prayer that God would nourish every virtue, a virtue like a father's love for his daughter, and bring to completion every good intent that we may grow in grace and bring forth good works. God answers these prayers often through little things. A handshake and a greeting at church might be just the tool he will use. A smile and a welcome rooted in the willingness to believe that sins really are forgiven has great attraction and power to bring forth a new person from the ashes of the old. Thank God for all the times he has done this to you. Praise Him that He invites you today to be part of doing this for someone else.

Tuesday of Pentecost 14 – Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

“And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. ² You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you... ⁶ Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’”

⁷ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? ⁸ And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

⁹ “Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children's children—

When I arrived at my first parish, we had a small group of women who served on an altar guild. It was a rather informal group. They took turns preparing the altar for Sunday. But I noticed that they kept coming to me looking for approval of what they had done. I was fresh out of the seminary. They did not teach a class on how to set an altar. The instruction we got was that every parish had its own practices and traditions, and that we would do well to let them continue and only change them after years of service.

Finally, the leader of the group, the senior altar guild member, explained it for me. Not long before I had arrived, her predecessor had passed away. Kay had been a wonderful woman who was thoroughly dedicated to that little congregation, but she was also a bit of a dictator on the altar guild. She would come forward for communion to receive the body and blood of Christ but also to check to see if the lines left in the carpet by the vacuum cleaner were straight and even. A veil crookedly placed across the communion ware would result in a stern admonition.

The current leader of the altar guild, also named Kay by coincidence, rolled her eyes and said that several of the women had been on the verge of quitting before the other Kay's sudden decline and death. We agreed on a new principle for the operation of the altar guild that day. We would try to do our best, but we would always remember that if we messed up, Jesus did not. He would still forgive sins through that meal, even if the corporal was a little crooked or had not been ironed perfectly flat.

Moses speaks of adding and subtracting from this word so that we may keep God's commands. I am constantly amazed at how we deflect our attention from the actual Word of God and focus on the rules which we construct. It is quite possible to kneel at a rail to receive the sacrament and be upset because the lines in the carpet are not straight, missing the miracle that sits on our tongue in that moment. Keep us, O Lord, from turning God's Word and means of grace into a law which would condemn us.

Wednesday of Pentecost 14 – Psalm 119:129-136

Pe

¹²⁹ Your testimonies are wonderful;
therefore my soul keeps them.

¹³⁰ The unfolding of your words gives light;
it imparts understanding to the simple.

¹³¹ I open my mouth and pant,

because I long for your commandments.
¹³² Turn to me and be gracious to me,
as is your way with those who love your name.
¹³³ Keep steady my steps according to your promise,
and let no iniquity get dominion over me.
¹³⁴ Redeem me from man's oppression,
that I may keep your precepts.
¹³⁵ Make your face shine upon your servant,
and teach me your statutes.
¹³⁶ My eyes shed streams of tears,
because people do not keep your law.

Psalm 119 is just a fun psalm. Unfortunately, it is also the longest chapter in the Bible and that fact often keeps us from reading it as we should. As we have noted before, Psalm 119 is an acrostic poem. Every verse in this section of the psalm begins with the letter "pe" which roughly corresponds to our letter "p." We cannot replicate this in English without destroying what the psalm says. We translate the meaning and put the Hebrew letter above the section to remind us of this acrostic structure.

Here's another fun fact. Most letters in the Hebrew alphabet also are words. Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet means "ox." Beth, the second letter, means "house." Pe means "face." You can add that to the other Hebrew words you may already know: Amen (it is so), Hallelujah (praise the LORD), Sabbaoth (hosts), and Bethlehem (house of bread).

Now, Look at verse 135. The word "pe" shows up in our psalm. God's face shines on us. You probably heard a similar thing when your pastor spoke a benediction at the end of the last church service you attended, "The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you." The picture is the beaming and smiling face of God. No frown of judgment, no storm clouds of anger or wrath here. God's face is the bright sunshine of joy at seeing you. If you have ever seen a person's face light up at seeing someone they love, you know the image. I pray it was when that other person saw you. That's how God sees you.

Thursday of Pentecost 14 – Ephesians 6:10-20

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵ and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; ¹⁷ and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, ¹⁸ praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,

¹⁹ and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

I can still hear the hollow sound of my foot striking the manhole cover in the middle of the street between the church my home. It was in the first parish which I served. We had gotten disturbing news. Most of the leadership of the congregation was leaving. There was no scandal or controversy involved. They were being transferred to work in other parts of the country. The parish was small, and this inexperienced pastor wondered what he would do without their seasoned presence in the life of the parish. They were the largest givers of both financial and other resources.

As my foot struck that round plate in the middle of the street it was as if a bell went off in my head. Suddenly I heard Eph. 2:8-10 being recited clearly in my head.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

In a moment the great burden of anxiety and worry lifted from me. I believe that this was a moment the Holy Spirit used Scripture to help me. I was no longer worried about what would happen. It was God's work, not mine. He would make it succeed if He wanted it. And it did.

Paul's image of armor here is a wonderful device he uses (by the Spirit's inspiration) to help us remember the message of the whole book of Ephesians. If you read back through the letter, you will find sections which talk about truth, faith, righteousness, peace, etc. He is urging us to listen and put into practice all that he has said in this wonderful letter to the Ephesians and to us. On that day, when I remembered/listened to those verses from Eph. 2, I was clothed in the breastplate of righteousness and held the shield of faith. The flaming arrows of my enemy, which would have had me despair and lose hope, were all extinguished.

Friday of Pentecost 14 – Mark 7:14-23

¹⁴ And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand:

¹⁵ There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him."¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

It had been another losing season for the college football team. The coach was a nice guy, but the alumni were demanding a change. The athletic director summoned the coach in for that dreadful meeting in which he would have to tell the man he was out of a job. The coach heard this news with incredulity. "But we only used two time-outs last season!"

This is patently ridiculous. No one would ever think a football season was a success because the coach had somehow managed to save all his time-outs. The time-outs allotted for a football game evaporate after the game. They are meaningless. But are we really all that different, imagining that God's favor and heaven are a reward for being nice or following a few rules? Do we sit in church and hear the cars driving by on Sunday morning and imagine that God somehow likes us better than those folks who are skipping church today to go golfing or fishing? Jesus was trying to get this across to the people of his day who thought that God really cared whether you ate a BLT or wore clothes that mixed cotton and wool fibers. God's interest is in you, not these peripheral things.

Jesus came because wretched things come out of your heart and defile you, rendering you unfit for God's presence. Often our own attempts to make things right are just another manifestation of our problem. Your and my solution will not be found in keeping this or that rule, having our doctrinal statements corrected to the final period, comma, or semicolon. Our solution is only found in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Yes, try to be a person who reflects the love which God showers down upon you. But never imagine that His love is bought by what you do or say or even by what you believe. His love for you flows out of his very nature and you cannot change that.