

Devotions for the sixteenth week after Pentecost: September 13-17

Monday of Pentecost 16 – Prayer of the Week

Lord Jesus Christ, our support and defense in every need, continue to preserve Your Church in safety, govern her by Your goodness, and bless her with your peace; for You live and reign with the Father the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

It is canning season at my house. Oregon is a particularly good place to be a gardener. Its mild winters and abundant summer sunshine make for a bountiful crop of many things. As I write these words, I am keeping my eye on a timer which will tell me when to take some jars out of the canner. We will enjoy spiced plums on cold winter days.

We pray in this prayer that God preserves His church. Just what are you asking for when you prayed those words on Sunday? I think sometimes we imagine God's preserving work to be akin to preserving a batch of plums. We prepare and treat them in order that that they do not change (go bad) over the next months. We want to enjoy them beyond their season, so we preserve them.

But is this really the way God preserves the church? Does He keep it from change? We are going through a time of great change in Christendom. The church I served as a newly minted pastor thirty years ago is hardly recognizable in some ways. That parish was a vibrant and joyful community. It was able to pay me to be its pastor. Now it is barely hanging on with less than 20 folks on a Sunday showing up. It feels like God is not preserving the Church. But God does not promise that the Church will not change. There are countless ruinous buildings across the European landscape which attest to the fact that Christians once worshiped in that place. The picture is of Melrose Abbey in Scotland. These buildings stand empty today, visited by tourists occasionally. Yet, we also must say that God preserves the Church. For all its ruins, people still are gathered, still worship, serve, and bear witness to Christ and his resurrection. I honestly do not know exactly what God is up to in these tumultuous days. I am not always sure that I like it. But I trust Him. He has promised to preserve His Church. In His way, He is doing it. We will not be a changeless, museum item, observed through glass and admired for what once was. The Church is a living and breathing community which God calls into existence through His Word. He is preserving that, governing the Church in His goodness, and blessing her with His peace.



Tuesday of Pentecost 16 – Isaiah 50:4-10

⁴The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,

that I may know how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.

Morning by morning he awakens;
he awakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught.

⁵The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious;
I turned not backward.

⁶I gave my back to those who strike,
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;
I hid not my face
from disgrace and spitting.

⁷But the Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.

⁸He who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me?

Let us stand up together.

Who is my adversary?

Let him come near to me.

⁹Behold, the Lord GOD helps me;
who will declare me guilty?

Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

¹⁰Who among you fears the LORD
and obeys the voice of his servant?

Let him who walks in darkness

and has no light

trust in the name of the LORD

and rely on his God.

He was not someone to be taken lightly. His comments could cut to the quick and being excoriated by him was never pleasant. We all were terrified of him my first year at the seminary. He assured us that he would have given Paul an A- for his sermon on the Areopagus in Acts 17. He was my homiletics professor.

When you got a little further into the term, however, or when you took another class or two from him, you learned that the piercing comments written in the margins of your papers and the in-class demolition of student arguments were in fact purposeful. If you took a moment to consider, you realized that he really cared about you, he cared enough to say what needed to be said about

the immature and poorly reasoned things I written or said. He also cared for the people I would serve upon graduation.

He had a tongue that had been taught. He used it to sustain the weary. For thirty years I have come back again and again to the lessons I learned in his classes. When the well seems dry or the words are not forthcoming, I remember the discipline and techniques that he taught us. Not all my fellow students were sustained by him, I am sure. Some were perhaps not ready for what he said. After all, no one, short of Jesus, can be appropriate for all people.

When I read in this passage about my Lord's instructed tongue which sustains the weary, I thank God for this man and his gift to me. I wish I had listened better than I did. But this man also turned me toward another whose tongue instructed him and all of us. The one who set his face like flint and turned his back to those who scourged him. He did not hide his face from the abuse they heaped upon him. He is Jesus. My friend and mentor rests in Christ today as someday I will too. But Jesus' Word will still be sustaining the weary and giving hope to those walk in darkness and have no light.

Wednesday of Pentecost 16 – Psalm 116:1-9

- ¹ I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my pleas for mercy.
- ² Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.
- ³ The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.
- ⁴ Then I called on the name of the LORD:
“O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!”
- ⁵ Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
our God is merciful.
- ⁶ The LORD preserves the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.
- ⁷ Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.
- ⁸ For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling;
- ⁹ I will walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.

I had just finished leading the chapel service for the parochial school where my wife taught in Murray, Utah. It was an 18-mile drive back to my office, most of it on the busy I-15 freeway. Like

many cities, people always drove too fast and too closely together. Not far into my journey a fireball erupted in the oncoming lanes of traffic across the interstate's median. A young woman, later analysis would never understand why, had suddenly veered into the undercarriage of a semi-trailer, causing the explosion that I saw. This then was followed by a cascade of accidents as cars were either directly impacted or were swerving to avoid the first accident. Multiple people died that day. I can close my eyes and still see that fireball erupting into the sky. It was very much like the special effects in a film, only this time it was not entertaining.

I was in the middle lane of traffic heading the other way. The press of cars simply carried me past this grisly scene. I remember seeing men and women rushing to twisted cars to help people. I wanted to join them, but I could not. Soon I was carried north and away, but that scene has never really left me.

The snares of death encompassed the psalmist in this psalm. He suffered distress and anguish. He cried out to the LORD: Deliver my soul! The rest of the psalm involves the Psalmist praising God for hearing and answering that prayer. The LORD preserves the simple. When I was brought low, he delivered me. Return to your rest, O my soul! The LORD has dealt bountifully with you. I walk before the LORD in the land of the living. He has delivered my soul from death. This psalm frequently is on my lips in some form as I close the door on my car after a journey. Every day he delivers my feet from stumbling, my eyes from tears, and my soul from death. One day I will die, but even on that day, he will deliver me from death again and I will walk forever in the land of the living.

Thursday of Pentecost 16 – James 3:1-12

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

In 1998 Andrew Wakefield, a gastroenterologist (a doctor specializing in the digestive tract and liver) published a now infamous study in the British medical journal the Lancet. In this article he

purported to link the MMR vaccine to autism. Immediately, vaccination rates in England started to decline. A couple years later the article gained a readership in America and the same trend happened here.

The study was flawed. The Lancet should never have published it because the survey sample was so small, only 12 children. The methods were not scientific, and the conclusions not supported by the data. What was also not revealed was that Wakefield had recently invested in testing kit and in a vaccine which was a competitor to the widely used MMR vaccine. He stood to gain from this article. The article was eventually retracted, and Wakefield was stripped of his license to practice medicine. But these facts were not immediately known, and the flawed study has had a tremendous impact, continuing to be cited by people opposed to vaccines to this day. Indeed, I even use this illustration in this devotion with some trepidation. I know that there are still adherents to Wakefield's thesis out there. Some of them attend Christian churches and may even be reading these words.

James speaks of the tongue, our words, having an outsized and frequently negative effect. He was not only talking about the ancient world. His observations still hold today. We are by virtue of our broken human natures prone to believing the worst. In an absence of sound information, rumor and inuendo will be believed. Sometimes even in the presence of sound information, we prefer the rumor and inuendo. That happens to everyone, including Christians.

At the end of this passage, James asks if a spring can produce both fresh and salty water. Can a fig tree produce olives, or a grape vine produce figs? In purely human terms, of course the answer is no. But we cannot only look at this in human terms. On Sundays I wear a black shirt with a little white tab at the collar. That white tab sits over my larynx. The symbolism is not difficult. I am a sinner, but the words of absolution and Gospel are pure and from God. In this age of the internet, we are surrounded by misinformation, spin, propaganda, rumor, and outright lies. The truth is hard to discern. Pray for discernment and wisdom, but also immerse yourself in the Word of Truth. Listen to its call to the twin love of God and of one another. We will make mistakes, sometimes listen to the wrong information, but this exhortation to love both God and our fellow human being will never really lead us astray.

Friday of Pentecost 16 – Mark 9:14-29

¹⁴ And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. ¹⁶ And he asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” ¹⁷ And someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. ¹⁸ And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.” ¹⁹ And he answered them, “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.” ²⁰ And they brought the boy to him. And

when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. ²² And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." ²³ And Jesus said to him, "'If you can!' All things are possible for one who believes."²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" ²⁵ And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." ²⁶ And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. ²⁸ And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁹ And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

After many years of work and owning his own business, my neighbor was ready to retire. His wife's career had also come to its fulfillment. They were so happy. But then a few months into retirement, she was not feeling well. She grew jaundiced, her skin turning a sickly yellowish green. They went to the doctor and the news was grim: pancreatic cancer. The next months were excruciating. There was nothing to do. Pancreatic cancer has a tiny survival rate. It is resistant to almost every treatment. Finally, we all gathered in the little Methodist church they attended. It was the day of her funeral.

We were helpless before what we saw in those months of her sickness and death. Re-read this portion of Mark. Do you see how everyone in this story was helpless except Jesus? The disciples cannot cast out this demon. It is too much for them. The young boy is helpless before its grip on him. The father is helpless too. When he speaks to Jesus he seems to be at the end of hope. "If you can..." he says to the Lord. Jesus tells him that all things are possible for those who believe. "I believe, help my unbelief!" cries the man. He knows he needs help on every quarter, even this most personal and intimate element of his life – his belief. The demon is exorcised but the child lies on the ground. The people all say, "He's dead." And death renders all of us helpless.

There was no funeral home industry in the ancient world. People buried the members of their own family. They were used to being around dead bodies. They knew what they looked like. This child looked dead. He was probably dead. But our Savior and Lord is not deterred by death. Indeed, when reading the Gospels, he does not seem even to recognize it. He takes the child by the hand and stands him up, alive. Even death must yield to Him.

Our Lord's final words in this reading are the key for us. He enjoins us to prayer. Prayer is simply the embodied action of faith. Prayer says that I cannot, but God can. We may say it in a hundred different ways, but finally it boils down to this simple admission. Like the disciples, like the boy, like the father, like my neighbor Gary and his wife, Sharon, like everyone else in this account and in this world, I am helpless. Our Sunday services often include the Kyrie – the prayer of the sick, blind, lame, and other helpless people in the Gospels and ever since that time: Lord, have mercy! He does have mercy on Sharon, my friend's wife, and our neighbor from many years ago. He has mercy on you too.