

## Devotions for the Seventeenth Week after Pentecost: Sept 19-23

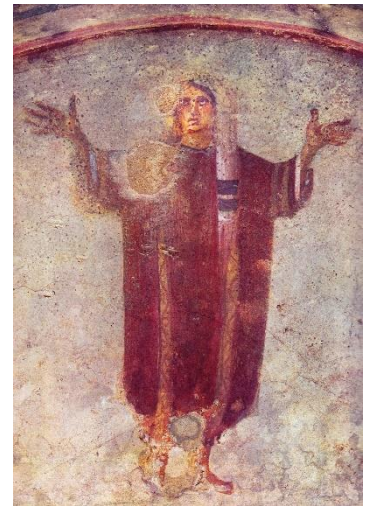
### Monday of Pentecost 17 – Prayer of the Week

O God, whose strength is made perfect in weakness, grant us humility and childlike faith that we may please You in both will and deed; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*It was two in the morning, and something was not right. My wife and I had been rejoicing for a couple months that our daughter was sleeping through the night. Now, this night, she was decidedly not sleeping. She was in her crib in the next room shrieking. My daughter has always been someone who could fill a room with her voice. It is a beautiful voice which now she puts to wonderful purposes in various choirs. It was not so great at two in the morning when she was a little child. It was certainly not something you could ignore.*

*I lurched out of bed and stumbled across the hall. By the dim illumination of a night light, I could see her sitting up in her crib, tears streaming down her face. She saw me. Immediately her arms lifted in the universal language of little children: Pick me up! I gathered her into my arms, and she rested her head against my shoulder. We walked around the room and down the hall a couple of times and soon she was back asleep and resting in her crib once more.*

*We pray for a child-like faith in this prayer. What makes faith “child-like”? It is not innocence or some purity, but the complete trust of a child in their parent. That gesture by my daughter of lifting her arms and asking me to pick her up and hold her is what I am thinking of. I never did figure out what troubled her that night, but the embrace of a parent was exactly what she wanted and needed. The ancient Christians prayed with their hands raised with their eyes wide open (I have included a picture from the catacombs to show what I mean). The practice we have of eyes closed, hands folded, and head bowed came to prominence in the medieval period. This image and those ancient Christians really remind me of my daughter that night.*



*One does not need to assume this posture to pray. God hears our prayers no matter what stance we take, but the child-like faith simply says, “Abba” which is the Aramaic for “Daddy.” God is the solution to every one of our problems.*

### Tuesday of Pentecost 17 – Jeremiah 11:18-20

<sup>18</sup> The LORD made it known to me and I knew;  
then you showed me their deeds.

<sup>19</sup> But I was like a gentle lamb  
led to the slaughter.

I did not know it was against me  
they devised schemes, saying,  
“Let us destroy the tree with its fruit,  
let us cut him off from the land of the living,  
that his name be remembered no more.”  
<sup>20</sup> But, O LORD of hosts, who judges righteously,  
who tests the heart and the mind,  
let me see your vengeance upon them,  
for to you have I committed my cause.

*I had been on the local Lutheran high school board for a year or so when the group asked me to serve as the vice-chair. It was not a terribly difficult position. I said yes, probably without asking enough questions. Several months into my tenure, the chairman abruptly announced that he was resigning from both his position and the board itself. Suddenly, I was the chair. I had just started to come to terms with this new position when the phone call came. A parent was accusing the organization’s director, a close friend of the former board chair, of abusing her child. Then another call came. I had not understood what was happening with my predecessor, but clarity was now forthcoming. The former chair had set me up in a way. He knew what was coming, could not deal with an accusation of this nature lodged against his friend, and so he handed it off to me. I felt a little like a lamb led to slaughter at that point.*

*Those were probably some of the most trying and difficult days of my ministry. I am ever grateful to God for putting a skilled and brilliant attorney on the board with me. He assumed the role of vice-chair and was invaluable to me as we navigated investigation and consequences of this situation.*

*Jeremiah occupied a far loftier political sphere than the board of directors of a small Lutheran high school. He had been the advisor to King Josiah, and we think Jeremiah was largely behind the many religious reforms which Josiah enacted. You can read about them in II Kings 22 and 23. When Josiah died, his sons rejected Jeremiah’s advice and we think his career as an oracular prophet started then. We are not sure which event he is talking about in this passage, but it appears that Jeremiah had a near escape as someone laid a trap for him. He says that he was like a lamb led to the slaughter. The consequences were dire. They seem to have meant the slaughter part quite literally and not metaphorically. But God revealed all to Jeremiah. He was saved and Jeremiah lays the whole affair in God’s capable hands. If there is vengeance to be taken, God will do that. Jeremiah looks forward to God’s judgment.*

*Jeremiah’s position is difficult to take. We often want to exact our vengeance on others. I was not happy with the former board chair or the executive director for blindsiding me with this. But ultimately this is in God’s hands. We did what we could do and had to do, and I believe we did the right things. If there is a millstone to be hung about anyone’s neck it is not mine to hang it. That belongs to God.*

### Wednesday of Pentecost 17 – Psalm 54

- <sup>1</sup> O God, save me by your name,  
and vindicate me by your might.
- <sup>2</sup> O God, hear my prayer;  
give ear to the words of my mouth.
- <sup>3</sup> For strangers have risen against me;  
ruthless men seek my life;  
they do not set God before themselves. Selah
- <sup>4</sup> Behold, God is my helper;  
the Lord is the upholder of my life.
- <sup>5</sup> He will return the evil to my enemies;  
in your faithfulness put an end to them.
- <sup>6</sup> With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;  
I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.
- <sup>7</sup> For he has delivered me from every trouble,  
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.

*A couple of weeks ago I had the privilege of holding a baby girl in my hands while I poured the waters of Baptism. That is an incredibly powerful experience for those of you who have not had it. As I poured that water over her head, I recited the ancient words, “I baptize you into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Did you catch the preposition there? It is terribly important; I baptize “into” the name. That rite, both water and Word, placed that fresh and young life into the mighty and loving name of God.*

*Now, when she prays, God will always hear her prayers. He has promised to hear her as a child. She may pray, “our Father” and it is no metaphor. God has adopted her. He gives ear to the words of her mouth. He is always near to hear her prayer.*

*She will face enemies in her life. They will seek her life in a variety of ways. One day they will succeed. Will it be some disease or heart failure? Will it be violence or an accident? I do not know, but I know it will happen to her as it will happen to me. I pray it is a gentle death after a life full of joy, family, love, and service.*

*No matter when death comes for her, however, I know that God will have been her helper and the upholder of her life. Those who accost her will not do so with impunity. God will have vengeance upon them and return their evil upon their heads. He is precious to God now. She is in His Name, I know because through water poured out of my hands and words spoken by my voice, God put her there.*

*Though she dies, she will be unharmed, even though she lay in a grave. For that baptism made another promise to that little girl that day. With a free will she will offer her sacrifices to God*

*once more. She will give thanks to God's name because it is a good name that has stood her well. He will deliver her from every trouble, including sin, death, and satanic foes. She will look upon them all in the triumph of resurrection.*

*That is what it means to pour that water on the head of a little girl in baptism. I praise God that he called me to do that. Join me in thanking him for my baptism and yours.*

### **Thursday of Pentecost 17 – James 3:13-4:10**

<sup>13</sup> Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. <sup>14</sup> But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. <sup>15</sup> This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. <sup>16</sup> For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. <sup>17</sup> But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. <sup>18</sup> And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

<sup>1</sup> What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? <sup>2</sup> You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup> You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. <sup>4</sup> You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. <sup>5</sup> Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? <sup>6</sup> But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." <sup>7</sup> Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

*I know a man who has been to prison. He was not a chaplain or a guard. He was convicted of a felony. I believe it was a miscarriage of justice. He was wrongly convicted on that day in court. A witness falsely testified. He could have raged and screamed. His legal counsel used the channels of appeal, but they were denied. He was sentenced and served time. I don't know what I would have done in that situation. I fear I would have become something terrible in my anger and frustration. I don't handle injustice very well.*

*My friend was different. He asserted his innocence but went to prison. The state had that authority, you see. He was a citizen, so he submitted to that authority. What is truly remarkable is what happened next. He was an older man at the time, around the age of retirement. A pious man of prayer and faith, he smiled and was courteous to guards and fellow prisoners. He did not posture or stake out turf. He helped and cared for all in need. It was not long before this farmer without a high school diploma had become the de facto chaplain in his part of the prison. His gentle nature and reasonable character enabled him to be the sort of person any member of the*

*prison community could talk to. And they talked. He was wise and they saw it. He became one who settled disputes mercifully and to the blessing of everyone. When he left that place, even cynical guards were sorry to see him go. They all felt they had been in the presence of holiness.*

*Look at verses 17 and 18 again. Read them slowly and ask how someone might live out each of the wise things that James lists there. I see my Lord's good work through my unjustly imprisoned friend. He heard Jesus calling him to service in that conviction, a service which he rendered with gentleness, peaceability, reasonableness, mercy, and sincerity; it bore much and good fruit.*

### **Friday of Pentecost 17 – Mark 9:30-37**

<sup>30</sup> They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, <sup>31</sup> for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.” <sup>32</sup> But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

<sup>33</sup> And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” <sup>34</sup> But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup> And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” <sup>36</sup> And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

*What was it like to be that child whom Jesus used as an example? I imagine Jesus sitting on a stool, embracing this little boy in his arms, standing the lad right in front of himself, and looking at his disciples over the little boy's shoulder, their faces side by side. How close they must have been. The Bible tells us nothing of that that little boy felt or thought of this event.*

*There are more children in this passage, are there not? Look at those disciples as Jesus asks them what they had been talking about on the road. They look just like a bunch of fourth graders whose teacher has confronted them about some playground incident. They all stare at the ground and say nothing. No one is willing to talk. The disciples had been arguing about who would be great in the kingdom of God. I suppose Peter thought he would be the prime minister and poor James the Less would be relegated to secretary of agriculture or something like that. It was foolish and shows that they had not been listening to Jesus.*

*But also look at our Lord himself, as he describes himself in the opening words. The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men, they will kill him, and he will rise again. Notice how helpless Jesus looks in that prediction. He is betrayed. Men kill him. He is a corpse, lying helpless in a grave until the Father raises him. Even more than a little child, he looks helpless.*

*Jesus uses the little boy to make a point. God's kingdom, the kingdom in which they are trying to leverage a place for themselves, operates on a completely different principle from that of the world. In a worldly empire, the emperor is served by all the citizens of the empire. He is at the*

*top of the service food chain. But God's kingdom inverts. God assumes his place of greatness in the heavenly kingdom by serving all, by become the one who submits to betrayal, scourging, death, and a tomb. He rose, but not to renounce his role as servant. He rose to shepherd and serve his people to all eternity.*

*There is a tradition, we do not know if it is true, but I like to think that it is, that this little boy grew up and eventually became the Bishop of Antioch. This is the very congregation which sent Paul on his missionary journeys. When an old man, in his 80's, he was accused and convicted of being a Christian and sentenced to die in the arena in Rome. On his way to martyrdom, he wrote at least seven letters. You can read them; an internet search will connect you to translations which are freely available. His name was Ignatius of Antioch. I recommend his letter to the Romans. He wants to look like Jesus, servant of all. He wants to give his life to save others.*