

Devotions for the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost, September 27-October 1

Monday of Pentecost 18 – Prayer of the Week

Everlasting Father, source of every blessing, mercifully direct and govern us by Your Holy Spirit that we may complete the works You have prepared for us to do; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

At the time it seemed like the very end of her world. The business she had carefully constructed over years of hard labor had collapsed through no fault of her own. These things happen, but they are painful when they happen. So many hopes and dreams had been wrapped up into that enterprise, along with a lot of her resources. She had managed to save some in the good years, but it was not how she was planning for this to go.

She took a position in company, an administrative assistant to a director. It was hard to step back into the world of being an employee after being her own boss. She needed the money, however, and this place did good work. It needed to make a profit, but it helped vulnerable people. In her job, she had access to some of the tragic details of the people whom her new company helped. It was not long before she was an advocate for them. She was engaged in the mission. It was more than just a means to work until she could retire.

When she did retire about a decade later, she had a completely different view of her business's collapse. She looked back upon it and saw the hand of God. He had called her to a new vocation as an advocate and servant of people who were vulnerable and had been on the receiving end of some terrible things.

We pray in this prayer that the Holy Spirit would direct and govern us so that we might accomplish the works that God has prepared for us to do. These last two years have seen what is likely a generational upheaval. It feels like high school graduates of 2020 and 2021 will always have an asterisk by their diploma. They graduated in the plague years when schools were shut down. Some businesses have closed, and others have thrived. As your life has been disrupted, take time to grieve and mourn what is lost, but also open your heart and listen. God may be calling you to something different and better.

Tuesday of Pentecost 18 – Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

⁴ Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat! ⁵ We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. ⁶ But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at...”

¹⁰ Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent. And the anger of the LORD blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased. ¹¹ Moses said to the LORD, “Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ¹² Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child,’ to the land that you swore to give their fathers? ¹³ Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For

they weep before me and say, ‘Give us meat, that we may eat.’ ¹⁴ I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. ¹⁵ If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness.”

¹⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you...”

²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. ²⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.

²⁶ Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” ²⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, “My lord Moses, stop them.” ²⁹ But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” ³⁰ And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

I had been angry and had said some things I regret. A little while later I came to my son and apologized. He put his hand on my arm and said blessed words, “I forgive you, Dad.” I treasure that moment to this day.

Moses prays aloud at the end of this lengthy passage. He asks that God pour out His Spirit on all people. God answered that prayer on a Pentecost morning over a thousand years later as Peter, James, John, and the rest of the disciples proclaimed Jesus’ kingdom with tongues of fire on their heads. Peter said that this was to fulfill a prophecy of Joel that all flesh would prophecy. He could have also said that this was in answer to Moses’ prayer.

That outpouring of the Spirit on all has continued. It continued the day that held my infant son in my hands and poured the water of baptism over his head. He was given the same Spirit that Peter had. When he put his hand on my arm and said, “I forgive you,” he was probably about 5 years old. He was a child, but Jesus stood behind his words as surely as he did the apostles of old. He was a prophet of God in that moment. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven in heaven... (Mt. 18:18 and Jn. 20:23)

Earlier in the passage the people complain that all they have is this manna. They wake up every morning to a miracle and complain. Do we cast our eyes about looking for a miracle from God when one stands right in front of us and is available every day? Forgive a sinner today, seek forgiveness for your sins. Revel in the miracle of what God does through his people, even a little child.

Wednesday of Pentecost 18 – Psalm 104:27-35

²⁷ These all look to you,

to give them their food in due season.

²⁸ When you give it to them, they gather it up;

when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

²⁹ When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.

³⁰ When you send forth your Spirit, they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.

³¹ May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works,

³² who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke!

³³ I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

³⁴ May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the LORD.

³⁵ Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
and let the wicked be no more!

Bless the LORD, O my soul!

Praise the LORD!

My doctoral advisor is a wise woman. Our discussions often ranged freely in our years of study together. One day the conversation roamed into the realm of science and faith. Karla attended the same church in which John Knox had preached in Scotland. She sang in the choir. She is a pious Christian. She observed that science is very good at describing things but not very good at explaining them. It could tell you how something happened, the processes by which something changed or grew, but science could not really explain why it happened.

The psalmist tells us that when God sends forth His Spirit living things are created and the very earth beneath our feet is renewed. If he withholds that same Spirit, everything withers and dies.

The sunflowers in my garden have come to the end of their season. It is time to pull them out and till the soil to prepare for next spring's planting. For their season they grew, and every day they turned their faces to the sun, reflecting its yellow glory in their own yellow blossoms. We can understand how seeds germinate, plants grow, and even how they turn their faces to the sun. We can describe how the plant had matured and finally even how it prepared to survive the winter through its seeds. But the answer to "why are there sunflowers?" must be found in God. Why are there beautiful things or why does life itself exist? Surely the cold and cruel universe does not need life; yet, here we are.

May the glory of the LORD endure forever; May the LORD rejoice in his works.

Thursday of Pentecost 18 – James 5:1-20

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ² Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. ⁴ Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you

kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. ⁵ You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

⁷ Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. ⁹ Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

¹² But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

¹³ Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

¹⁹ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

I used to teach a Monday morning Bible study in my former parish. The usual cast of characters showed up to this study, primarily retirees, particularly a group of widows. It was a delightful group and I really enjoyed spending time in God’s word with them. We were looking at this passage when I said that they were rich. I remember Billie, Mabel, Pat, and the other Pat in the group looking at me with large round eyes. These women scrimped and sacrificed to make the money last to end of the month. They lived in very modest homes and drove sensible little cars. How could I call them rich?

I reminded them that most of the world does not have a refrigerator or a car. They often lived in multigenerational families in one or two rooms. They might not have indoor plumbing. By the standards of much of the world, they were rich indeed. We might be tempted to think that James is talking about Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos or some other ultra-wealthy person, but he actually has folks just like us in mind when he rails against the rich. But James is not a socialist, not really. He is not even against the rich, but against the behavior of the rich. His problem with the rich is that they trust their wealth. And in trusting

wealth for their security, they are willing to take advantage of their neighbor to get a little more security, a little more money.

James offers us three things to do instead.

- *Practice patience. Be like a farmer who must wait for the rains from heaven. God sends them in his own time.*
- *Do not try to force things. Do not use the verbal violence of an oath. Simply say yes or no as situations dictate.*
- *He then admonishes us to pray. God hears our prayers and answers them. Bring to him the worries and concerns which you have.*

Lastly, he tells us to watch out for each other. I remember the tight little community of those women who came to the Bible study. They cared for one another and were fiercely loyal to one another. But this also meant that when one of them had erred, they stood ready to correct and loving to help the wandering sister back to health and her place in the community. When I am old, I pray I have a group of friends who are like that, who are patient with me, do not force things on me, but who pray for and with me. They really were rich in more ways than one.

Friday of Pentecost 18 – Mark 9:38-50

³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

⁴² “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ ⁴⁹ For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

One of my best instructors in the study of the Bible hammered home again and again the principle that context is everything. This passage is one of the best examples of that principle. Jesus speaks of acts of desperation. If the choice was between life and death, in desperation we might cut off a hand or a foot or be willing to lose an eye. But that is not the choice and Jesus knows it and you do as well. I have known a few amputees in my life. They still sin. It is not the eye or the hand or the foot that causes me to sin. I do that. There is no 12-step program, no therapy, no self-help process, even those based on the Bible, which will expel this old sinner who lurks in myself. I cannot cut him out because he is me.

Jesus wants you to feel that helplessness. It is the very essence of the childlike faith he talked about last week and he will talk about again next week. You are the child, helpless before the power of your own

sinful self. You could not change it even if you really wanted to, and that old stinker within doesn't really want to change. When eternal death looms, no act of will, no effort, and no amount of chopping will make any difference. If we whittle you down to the nubs, there is still that old sinner in you.

But there is Someone who makes a difference. These words of Jesus are right in the middle of three predictions of his own death in Mk. 8, 9, and 10. Dial it in a little closer and we hear Jesus speaking about children, both last Friday and today. We will hear of children again next week. I encourage you to read and notice the children in the paragraphs around this passage. Notice the value that Jesus places on them. They are precious to him. His justice is fierce on their behalf. He rewards the smallest act of kindness shown to them. Now, know that with these words he has reduced you to childlike helplessness before you sin. Jesus is not trying to condemn you, not really. He wants you to see the danger you are in and to hear His comfort. He dies for sinners like you, not because you ever got anything right. He dies for sinners like you because that is what He does. He loves his creation that much.