



Sunday Devotion

July 19, 2020

Find a quiet place by yourself or with another and come to God.

HYMN SING #829 My Faith Looks Up to Thee

1. My faith looks up to thee,
thou Lamb of Calvary, Savior divine!
Now hear me while I pray; take all my guilt away
O let me from this day be wholly thine!

3. While life's dark maze I tread
and griefs around me spread, be thou my guide;
bid darkness turn to day; wipe sorrow's tears away;
Nor let me ever stray from thee aside.

#819 Be Still, My Soul

1. Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide,
who through all changes faithful will remain.

2. Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake
to guide the future surely as the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
all now mysterious shall be bright at last.

CALL TO WORSHIP

The Lord knows each and every one and loves all dearly.
Sometimes it feels as though God has drifted away.
Be strong! Look for the ways in which God is present to you.
Given all the troubles of the day, we often look more closely at these.
Come, open your heart and spirit to God's love and presence.
Lord, help us to see your presence in all of life's circumstances. Amen.

OPENING PRAYER

God of surprises, we come here from the weariness of the week, from various triumphs, from fears and doubts.
Open our hearts to receive your surprising message of hope for all people, for we ask this in Jesus' name.
Amen.

HYMN #385 All People That on Earth Do Dwell

1. All people that on earth do dwell,
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
him serve with mirth, his praise forth tell.
Come ye before him and rejoice.

3. O enter then his gates with praise;
approach with joy his courts unto;
praise laud, and bless his name always,
for it is seemly so to do.

2. Know that the Lord is God indeed;
without our aid he did us make;
we are his folk; he doth us feed,
and for his sheep he doth us take.

4. For why? The Lord our God is good;
his mercy is forever sure;
his truth at all times firmly stood,
and shall from age to age endure.

PRAYER OF BROKENESS

Merciful God, you plant each of us like seeds in the same field and together we are nourished and nurtured by

the sun. We sway in the wind and are refreshed by the rain. We are blessed by the knowledge that you want us to grow towards what you call us to be.

When we deprive others of that same opportunity, forgive us.

When we want to uproot those whom we believe do not belong in our part of the field, forgive us.

When we label others as good or bad rather than accept them for who they are, forgive us.

When we are reluctant to acknowledge that we ourselves are a mixture of weeds and wheat, forgive us.

When we are afraid to look into the fields of our own lives to see what is growing there, forgive us.

O God, you know us inside and out, through and through. You search us out and lay your hand upon us. You know what we are going to say even before we speak. So we pray that you will help us to reach out to the uprooted and rejected, the lonely and the outcast, and to develop and grow the good in ourselves, in others and in the world. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen

WORDS OF FORGIVENESS AND GRACE

Great news has come to us, dear friend. God, who is faithful and just, who cherishes us as we are, seeks restoration and healing for those broken places in our lives, forgives and loves us unconditionally. Receive the good news: Jesus died for you. Jesus forgives you. Jesus loves you. Jesus is good to you. Amen.

FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON Genesis 28:10-19a

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹² And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴ and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵ Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." ¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" ¹⁷ And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹ He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON Matthew 13:24-30

²⁴ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' ²⁸ He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

SERMON

Life is full of experiences. Hopefully we can learn something from them and come away having been enriched. I'd like to share with you an experience I had during my childhood. It was the summer of my 17th birthday. My parents had just moved out of Pittsburgh and into a suburb of Toledo Ohio called Perrysburg. Relevant to this

story is that one thing my father had in Ohio was his toy, which was a sixteen foot runabout boat. I will never in my life understand that man. Most people take their pleasure crafts out on the water in the daytime and enjoy the sun and the fun. Not my dad. My dad liked to go out at night. Why? I have no idea. Something else you need to know about that sixteen foot boat, we were not the original owners. Also, it had the nickname of "The Leaking Lena," which it *did* quite a bit, leak, that is. It was a rather old wooden boat. It also had a very old outboard motor that broke down frequently for one reason or another.

And so on a warm summer night, my father, my mother and I went out on the boat. I went under protest. My dad's goal was to do the length of the Maumee River until it dumps into Lake Michigan. So that was our goal. At about 11:30 at night, the engine died. We were in the middle of the river. We had gone to Lake Michigan. Now we were on our way back, but at 11:30 at night my father said to my mother, who was in her mid-forties, and to his seventeen year old daughter, "You go get the car and I'll wait with the boat."

We were in the middle of downtown Toledo Ohio. If you have never been to that part of the world, let me tell you, in 1975 it wasn't a very pleasant place to be. I have no idea how far of a walk we had to our car, but it had to be at least ten miles. There were no buses. There were no cabs. And so it was that my mom and I were going to walk through downtown Toledo back to our car in Perrysburg. But my mother would not have this.

In downtown Toledo Ohio there was a gas station. The gas station had a convenience store. Unlike the gas stations and convenience stores of Pennsylvania, in Ohio, you can purchase alcohol at said places. It was my mother's decision that we would go into this convenience store and we would get ourselves a ride. I begged my mother to reconsider saying something like, "No, please, I'd like to see my eighteen birthday!" "It will be fine," she said.

There were two men there buying beer after they had gassed up their car. They were probably in what looked like to me at seventeen, their late twenties, maybe early thirties. My mom approached these two guys and said, "We need a ride."

They responded, "Okay," and I thought, "This is it. Life is over."

We got into the back of their old car. They were in the front with their beer. My mother was chatting with them like it was the middle of the afternoon and she had known them all of our lives. I was cowering in the back seat praying, "Please God, let us live."

They drove us back to our car. We then drove back to my father who was still in the boat. The two guys followed us the whole way. They then helped us get the boat onto the trailer and made sure we got home safe and sound. I never would have imaged that could have happened at 11:30 at night in Toledo Ohio with two very naïve and somewhat young women in that particular neighborhood.

It reminds me of the song, "Signs" by the Five Man Electric Band. The singer tells in the song of seeing a sign in the window where it said, "Help Wanted," and so he goes inside and applies for the job. The owner says, "You seem like a fine upright young man. We don't want any of those long-haired hippie freaks working here." The main character then removes his hat; his hair flows down and he says, "Imagine that, me working for you. What gives you the right" to discriminate.

If we are honest, I dare say that most of us have a button that can be pushed when we meet someone that causes us to make some sort of judgment of character concerning that individual. We are quick to judge and unfortunately it would seem that the "religious" people are very guilty of this practice. For this, Jesus gives us today's parable that hits an all too familiar chord in most of us, especially me.

A great landowner wanted to make the most of his holdings. He purchased the best possible seed to guarantee a good return from his land. But he had an enemy. One night while his workers were sleeping, the enemy slipped into the field and sowed noxious weeds everywhere, right in the midst of the grain. In time, of course, the crime became evident, as weeds appeared in the field. The workers sought advice from their employer:

“Shall we uproot the weeds and cast them out?” The answer was no because in so doing they may tear up some of the grain with the weeds. Wait until it is harvest time.

The meaning of the parable seems rather clear and yet, is hard to take. The landowner is Jesus and the good seed are the children of the kingdom of God. The weeds are the “children of the evil one.” The enemy who sows is the evil that penetrates the world. And such is the state of the world – the good grain growing together with the weeds where, in fact, they are often so intermixed and even indistinguishable that judgment cannot be made until the day of final reckoning.

Can’t you just see those poor disciples? I imagine them listening to this parable and nodding knowingly throughout—until the end. Maybe it took a moment, but then they sat up, looked Jesus in the eyes and said, “Wait, what?” They were so sure they knew how this was to turn out and when it didn’t, they had to ask for an explanation in order to double check. “What does this mean, Jesus?” It isn’t surprising that they would react this way. They lived in a world where the religious leaders were constantly “removing the weeds.” The good religious folk sat in judgment as to who was “unclean,” or “sinner” and that one was pushed out of acceptance. To associate with such a person was to become unclean yourself. “Weeds” were clearly defined as pagans – gentile foreigners, the poor, tax collectors, prostitutes and the like. Good Jews did not associate with the likes of these and were thrown out of their midst. This was to preserve religious purity, to keep oneself right with God.

In human nature we have a saying, “Time heals all wounds.” Theologian Leonard Sweet turns this around and says, “what we are really hoping for is that *time wounds all heels!*” We want the bad guy to get his. We want those people we consider weeds to be pulled out and thrown into the fire and get their just sentence. That’s what we have been waiting for and that’s what the disciples expected Jesus to say.

Jesus tells them something very different. Jesus says leave them there. There are two reasons for that. First, it is hard to tell wheat from weeds. Anyone who has worked a garden knows how easy it is to pull up the good plant with the weeds. When my children were younger they were given the chore of weeding the garden. They still have PTSD from the experience. Eventually I didn’t let them anywhere near it. Why, because they had a habit of pulling the wrong plant. Even if they could tell the difference in what is growing, if they weren’t careful, the good plant’s roots may have intertwined with the weed and both would be pulled out together. The explanation I have heard is that the best way to be sure you are removing a weed and not a valuable plant is to pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily, it is a good plant.

In addition, some weeds have their own beauty. One person will look at a field of weeds like dandelions, Queen Ann’s lace or clover and think, “That is beautiful.” Another will look and think, “The battle has yet to be fought.” Beauty truly is in the eye of the beholder. What is wheat and what is weed? What is good what is undesirable?

It is difficult to tell. In our first scripture lesson this morning we heard about Jacob, the cheater. He cheated his brother out of his birthright by disguising himself as his brother to get his ailing father so that he, Jacob, not firstborn and dad’s favorite Esau, would be blessed. And yet, for all of his mischievous ways, we hold him up as one of the forefathers of the Judaism. He was an inheritor of the covenant promise who in turn passed that promise to his own son. This is the one that was chosen by God.

This leads us to the second point. God is a much more tolerant farmer than we may think is wise. But God is patient and willing to just wait giving the plant, or person, a chance to display its beauty.

The time until the harvest is the time God allows for people to come to the knowledge of God’s love and grace for all. We may not be aware of those who respond. In fact, we may be troubled at times because we see nothing happening. But God may be at work in ways we can’t even imagine.

I had a friend who volunteered in a prison chaplain’s office. Dick shared the story of a man who had been in prison for thirty-one years. That’s a long time and yet for thirty-one years that man never showed any signs of

bitterness about his situation. He claimed that if he hadn't been in prison, if he hadn't lived in those conditions with those people in that place, he never would have found God.

Pastor Clovis Chappell loved to say that everyone has the right to enter the kingdom of heaven, but no one has the right to shut anyone else out. Only God is the judge. Our judgment will be fallible by our own social, intellectual, and person preconceptions and we can't hope to eliminate all those prejudices in our judging others. We do well to stay out of the judgment business.

These are very judgmental times we are living in right now. The deep divides of our country are the result of how we are constantly judging each other. But we can thank God because God is much more patient with us and has far better vision of who we truly are than anyone of us. God is a loving, benevolent farmer who will let the wheat and the weeds grow together. We are to do the same. Amen.

PRAYER

Lord, we wonder about you. We look around us at the mighty power and majesty of nature, and it is easy for us to sing songs of praise for your creation. But then we look at the ways in which people treat one another. Too often, lying and cheating are touted as the ways in which we should live. We see deceit and anger, hostility and hatred, and we wonder where the visions of the angels descending and ascending are today. We long for times of peace and joy yet are drawn into the horrors of the world. Be with us, Lord. Help us see and feel your presence in our lives. Help all those who suffer in body mind and spirit to feel your presence and access your strength. Help us place our trust in you. For there is much work to be done in your world, and you have called us to this work. Help us to see those places of need and offer our support. Help us to gain and understanding of what we can do in the places that are torn apart by division, anger and judgment. Guide our steps and guard our lives. For we ask this in Jesus' Name. Amen.

HYMN #317 In Christ There Is No East or West

1. In Christ there is no east or west,
in him no south or north,
but one great fellowship of love
throughout the whole wide earth.

2. In Christ shall true hearts everywhere,
their high communion find;
his service is the golden cord
close-binding humankind.

3. Join hands, disciples of the faith,
whate'er your race may be.
all children of the living God
are surely kin to me.

4. In Christ now meet both east and west;
in him meet south and north.
All Christly souls are one in him
throughout the whole wide earth.

BENEDICTION

Go forth as God's people.

Greet everyone as one of the family.

Go forth as a follower of Jesus.

Serve everyone you meet, especially those who have been thrown aside by the world.

Go forth with the gifts of the Spirit in you.

Be that hope which everyone longs to see.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever. Amen.