

*Sunday Worship
A Service for Your Use at Home
St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247
Allen M Fluent, Pastor*

August 23, 2020

Because of the pandemic caused by the corona virus, our congregation, along with many others, has decided that we must forego gathered worship services at this time. Each Sunday until we gather again, we will provide worship materials that members and friends can use in our homes in the knowledge that we are not alone, but are celebrating these holy days with our friends and neighbors in the faith. As you use this worship service, I hope you will pause and remember the tune to a familiar hymn as you read the words, and pray as partners in the fellowship of Christ.

If you have access to a computer or cell phone, you may want to open the video recording of the Scripture and Sermon provided by the pastor on both our church website and the message sent to all who are on our email list.

Today is the eleventh Sunday after Pentecost. Welcome to our worship.

As we begin our worship today, let us join together in a hymn of praise. Read the words and hum the tune, if you remember it.

***O for a thousand tongues to sing my great redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace.***

***My gracious master and my God, assist me to proclaim,
To spread through all the earth abroad the honors of your name.***

***Jesus! The name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease,
'tis music in the sinner's ears, 'tis life and health and peace.***

***To God all glory, praise, and love be now and ever given
By saints below and saints above, the church in earth and heaven.***

Our reading from the Psalms for this morning is Psalm 124. It speaks in its ancient context about a God who is on our side and protects us against our enemies. In the spirit of Jesus, who taught us to love and pray for our enemies, it will be helpful to remember that God is on the side of us all as we confront the spiritual enemies that would destroy our soul. May God protect us from such forces in our lives.

*If it had not been the Lord who was on our side – let Israel now say –
If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us,
then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us.
Then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us;
then over us would have gone the raging waters.
Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth.
We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we
have escaped.
Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*

Our New Testament lesson today is from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10, verses 17-29, a story about Jesus and a young man who wanted to feel saved:

*As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.
Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”*

The Sermon:

(Note: For those who want to see and hear a video of the complete sermon you can find it on our church website or open the message that you will receive if you have given us your email address.)

The distraught widow was clearly ill at ease as she spoke to me following her husband's death, as though she felt she had to defend him even now, even to me, a minister who had only been called in to conduct his funeral because they didn't know anybody else. I suspected that she had often played this role of defending him before. "Joe wasn't much of a churchgoer," she said. "But he never did nothing to nobody."

After mentally rejecting the many possible responses I might have made to this introduction to who her husband was, I suggested tentatively, "You're saying he was a good person."

"Yeah," she said, "but you just couldn't get real close to him."

For many years, my mind has gone back to the conversation with this woman and I've been reminded that it takes more than a moral code of "Thou shalt nots" to be happy and fulfilled in this life, or even to be a good person.

A man ran up to Jesus, knelt down before him, and addressed him: "Good Teacher, what do I have to do to inherit eternal life?" I have heard this question asked by now in many different ways throughout the years: What do I have to do to know God loves me? What do I have to do to feel satisfied with my life? Or with myself? What do I have to do to be at peace? What do I have to do to put my family back together? What do I have to do to experience Christ? How can I know that what I'm doing with my life is really worthwhile? What can I do to be saved?

Those may not seem to be the same thing as the question that was asked by the man who ran up to Jesus, but they are really very close. The words that we translate "eternal life" in the Bible meant more than going to heaven, among the people of Jesus' day. They had to do with a quality of life expressed

as living in harmony and fellowship with God, in such a way that none of life's calamities and temptations, nor even death itself, could interrupt the sense of inner peace that comes from our awareness of God's gracious acceptance.

"Who can separate us from the love of Christ?" asks Paul in his letter to Rome. "Neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

But how to obtain such awareness of grace? What do we do to be sure of it?

"Why do you call me "good," said Jesus, who seemed to view the title as inappropriately complimentary for a human messenger. "Only God is good, and you know what God commands you to do." Then, just to be sure, he named a few thou-shalt-nots, like murder and adultery, stealing, lying and cheating – and one thou-shalt – to honor father and mother.

"Yes," said the man. "I remember those things. I learned them in Sunday school and vacation church school and confirmation class." And I've lived by them ever since, at least I don't think I broke any of them." And then he fell thoughtfully silent. The scriptures don't tell us what he was feeling in that eternal moment of silence before Jesus, but I think I know what it was; I think it was something that you and I, at least most of us, have also felt sometimes: if I've lived a good life, read the Scriptures, prayed on Sunday, and fulfilled my obligations to church and family, then why don't I feel the comfort of knowing my life is in harmony with the realm of God? What do I have to do to inherit eternal life? What commandment have I left out?

The intensity of the man, and his sincerity in seeking an answer to his question, must have been obvious to Jesus. Perhaps he was trembling, even crying. He wanted so deeply for his life to be set right with God. We are told that Jesus loved him. It is clear that he had moved Jesus emotionally to want to help him. So Jesus told the man that he was lacking one thing, and gave him

three explicit directions: to sell what he owned, give his money to the poor, and follow him, trusting in the treasures of heaven. We don't know whether or not the man eventually followed Jesus. His decision is not recorded. But we are told that he was shocked and went away grieving, because he had many possessions.

One might well ask, what was it that Jesus had in mind when he told the man that he was lacking in one thing? More explicitly, was he being hard on the man, or even cruel to him? Did he believe that the man was lacking in generosity, or commitment, or courage? Is there still another commandment beyond all the others, that we sell everything we have and give it away in order to come closer to God? Is this something more that we have to do to be saved?

I've never been good at giving things up. Not even in Lent. For the most part, my devotional life does not include the discipline of self-deprivation. Over the past few years, however, I've needed to adapt my life style to the diminishing size of my residence. Nora and I have moved three times since our official retirement a few years ago. The first move was the hardest, because it was from a fairly large house to a condo. The next two moves were to apartments. We were happy to pass along the large pieces of furniture that were family heirlooms to our children, and now we go visit them in our children's houses, but the smaller things – collections of acquisitions from our travels, little treasures that carry memories for us, books I read once forty years ago and thought I'd go back and read them again – those things were hard. I felt genuine pain, and sometimes had to put something in a box three times or more before I could let it go. For the most part, I no longer miss what I gave away, but I remember the feelings of withdrawal. When we continue holding on to something that no longer gives us pleasure, that thing is likely to represent an addiction; we have to let it go in order to be free.

The man who came to Jesus was not a happy man. He was not speculating about his future welfare. He was deeply disturbed with his life right now, his sense of well-being in God's universe. Jesus told him what to let go of in order to remove the impediment to his personal sense of freedom. But it was

very hard for him to do. We understand his predicament, because there is nothing more damnably addictive in our own society than the accumulation of material possessions. And it may be the appropriate time for us to confess that we live in a society that has been demonstrably willing to harm our earth and atmosphere and water for material possessions, to impoverish two thirds of the world's people for them, to put women and children to work in unspeakable conditions, restrict immigration to the industrialized nations of the world, and fight wars for them.

Now this is the strange lesson that the story of the rich man who said no to discipleship has to offer us: The man was unable to experience the grace of the Gospel because he thought he had to do something to earn it. He thought he had to do something to earn it, because he was addicted to doing whatever was necessary to earn his earthly rewards. Whenever you think of the Gospel as having a price, the price is always too steep. But the truth is that placing the Gospel of Jesus Christ at the center of our commitments puts the other rewards we strive for into perspective, so that it is possible to sort out the important from the unimportant.

We really don't know what happened to the man. We know that he was disappointed and saddened when he left Jesus. Perhaps he later re-examined himself and returned. But at the time he left, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, perhaps with sadness in his voice, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven." He might also have added that that is because the rich person, or the person distracted with the effort to earn God's rewards, just doesn't know how to get in, until God opens the door, as God does for all of us. Because, "with God all things are possible."

The world in all its abundance is the free gift of God for the life of all humanity. To know the eternal life of God we have only to share in this abundance with the whole community of God's people. It is for each of us to ask ourselves what it is that keeps us from experiencing the presence of God in

such a world, and to learn to accept the free gift that is ours, approaching the throne of grace with boldness.

Our Time of Prayer

We give you thanks, God, for the knowledge that salvation comes to us as a free gift of your grace. But we also know that salvation comes to us only when we let go of those things that we place before our faithfulness to you. May we seek no comfort, security or power at the cost of causing suffering to others. May we find the strength to commit ourselves to the mutual care that has always marked the followers of the Way of Christ.

We pray for patience during this time of social isolation, and for the knowledge that our prayers rise up for one another in this time.

We lift up in prayer the people of Lebanon, caught in the midst of political unrest and physical injury; the people of Iowa who are suffering the effects of a great windstorm; the people of the east coast following a hurricane; those who were victims of the shootings in Cincinnati last weekend; and all children, college students and teachers who are returning to classrooms or virtual learning this month.

Let us pray in the words of our Lord Jesus:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom
come,**

**Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily
bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.**

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God our Heavenly Parent, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

