

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sunday closest to August 24

Proper 16

Year B

RCL



Ephesians 6:10-20

Psalm 84

John 6:56-69

The Collect

Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 6:10-20

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may de-

clare it boldly, as I must speak.

Psalm 84 or 84:1-6 Page 707, BCP

Quam dilecta!

- 1 How dear to me is your dwelling, O LORD of hosts!
My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the
LORD; my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living
God.
- 2 The sparrow has found her a house and the swallow
a nest where she may lay her young; by the side of
your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.
- 3 Happy are they who dwell in your house! They will
always be praising you.
- 4 Happy are the people whose strength is in you!
Whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.
- 5 Those who go through the desolate valley will find it
a place of springs, for the early rains have covered it
with pools of water.
- 6 They will climb from height to height, and the God
of gods will reveal himself in Zion.
- 7 LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; hearken, O
God of Jacob.
- 8 Behold our defender, O God; and look upon the face
of your Anointed.
- 9 For one day in your courts is better than a thousand
in my own room, and to stand at the threshold of the

house of my God than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.

10 For the LORD God is both sun and shield; he will give grace and glory;

11 No good thing will the LORD withhold from those who walk with integrity.

12 O LORD of hosts, happy are they who put their trust in you!

John 6:56-69

Jesus said, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter

answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

SERMON

We live in a world of wonders. We are surrounded by miracles of such magnitude that we have lost the ability to appreciate them. I read an account some time ago of an early trial run of a steam engine. The passengers were promised that they would be propelled along a track at speeds as high as 15 miles per hour. Everyone aboard were terrifically excited and many brought notebooks to demonstrate that the human mind could still function at such unheard of velocities. Now we careen along the asphalt at more than 70 miles per hour and are so oblivious to what we are doing that we try to text on our cell phones while doing it so as not to become bored.

I'm convinced that we have become numb to the embarrassment of riches in which we live. My grandmother told me in much detail of trips in her childhood from Leaper, Ohio to Crown City, a trip of some 15 minutes

today, which required an entire day then. We jump on the Interstate and scarcely register a memory during trips which would have required many weeks' travel for my grandmother's generation. We live surrounded by miracles made invisible by our own inattention.

This is the perspective our culture imposes on us and we, who live within that culture, bring those expectations in turn to the Gospels and to Communion. We have become, you will forgive me for saying so, numb to wonder. It is that numbness, that spiritual ennui, that I am called to address today. And I must begin with a confession: I believe in the significance of dreams. Not all dreams. Most dreams are nonsense. I believe in significant dreams.

If I believe as Jesus taught and as I confess – that the Holy Spirit abides within us – then I must also believe that the Holy Spirit within me is more than a score keeper ticking off the things I do right and the things I

do wrong – the Holy Spirit speaks. It is my belief that one of the ways the Holy Spirit speaks to us is in significant dreams. You're free to disagree, but that is my belief, born of long experience.

This week, I had a significant dream. As is my custom, I had read the texts on Monday and had begun praying for words to speak to you. On Tuesday, I began composing this Sunday's sermon. I continued on Wednesday, but the words were not coming to me. I put it down and again prayed. Wednesday night, I had the dream.

In my dream, I had been asked to preach in Louisville. Kathy and I started out toward Louisville, but it's a long drive and I wanted to show off how skilled a navigator I was, so I turned off at a shortcut. It soon became clear that my shortcut wasn't the road I should be on. Indeed, it quickly became clear that it wasn't even the road that I had thought it was, but I

stubbornly went on my own way, assuming it would get better. It did not. We consulted the GPS app on our phones, but the phones would not function properly. They showed us lovely pictures, but refused to show a map. In desperation, we consulted an atlas, but it, too, made no sense. Still, I plowed on in my own way, convinced it would get better.

At this point, the dream woke me, much upset. I went back to sleep, and the dream returned. Now we had arrived in the small town of Hindman. We sought out locals to tell us what path we should take to continue our journey. The locals tried to give us directions, but then became confused and admitted they did not know the way. I awoke again, feeling sick. I took some Pepto and went back to sleep. The dream resumed.

Now we were at an outdoor worship service in the same small town. Kathy lead me into the field following a choir. Somehow we became separated. Kathy re-

mained with the choir but I returned to the car and drove off! Now, following my own way had cost me the company of the woman I most love.

Eventually, I found myself at a small church. I went in. It was too late to preach at the service, but I was invited to preach to a Sunday School class. Unfortunately, by the time I was introduced, the time had elapsed, and there was no time for me to preach. As I left the small church, I wanted to thank them for their kindness. I asked a person if he were with the church. He must have mistaken me for a beggar, for he asked in return, “How much do you need, sir?”

I told him I had enough, for clearly, now, I did have enough and to spare.

You see, in following my way, my shortcut, and refusing to admit that I had made a mistake, no good was done, and much evil. “My way” each week involves reading the Scriptures from the Lectionary, then consult-

ing the resources you have provided for me, then writing up clever words to explain what I have read to you. That's my "shortcut". You don't have to read all that Scripture. I'll do it for you, then explain it to you on Sunday.

The dream insists that my shortcut would take us far from the path we should be following with the Gospel text for today. I am convinced that I am called this Sunday to teach you another way. I am convinced that I am called to teach you how to attend to the Holy Spirit who dwells within you instead of asking you to attend to my words, however cleverly I speak them.

This is a hard teaching. It will be outside your comfort zone. When Jesus first taught it, John tells us, "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'" Nonetheless, we will do.

To attend to the indwelling Holy Spirit, first you

must cultivate silence. Silence is not an easy thing for modern people to endure but it is indispensable if we are to attend to the Holy Spirit. We must first, then, find silence. To do so, I would like for you to assume an attitude of prayer now. I do not wish you to form a prayer in your mind, nor address a prayer to any specific image of God. It is enough for you to assume an attitude of prayer, of attentive listening. Be aware that you will find that your mind wanders. That's to be expected. When you become aware that your mind has wandered, gently return to your attitude of prayer. We shall have silence for a while. Shortly, I shall give you a centering prayer, then I shall read our Gospel passage to you in a special way, and you will hear it in the attitude of prayer. Let us pray....

Now, I would like for you to be aware of your inner silence by repeating these words silently. As you inhale, say to yourself, "Lord, Jesus Christ." As you exhale,

think, “teach me how to pray.” Keep repeating your prayer, for prayer is communion and the Lord Jesus Christ will teach you how to pray if you but ask. While you do, I will read to you our Gospel passage.

Jesus said, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

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In the synagogue at Capernaum, where Jesus spoke these words, John tells us

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

Yes, it is a difficult teaching. It is much easier for me to explain to you the meaning of the words you read, but unless you eat of His flesh and drink of His blood, it

is for nothing that I speak. Jesus lost many disciples when he offered this teaching.

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

The gift I give you today, for those who are granted by the Father to respond, is very old. It was practiced by Thomas Aquinas and by St. John of the Cross. It has been lost to modern Protestant worship. Its loss is great. We are the poorer for it. If you are called to contemplative prayer as a practice, and to lectio divina as a means of reading Scripture, I urge you to surrender to that call, for it is none other than the Holy Spirit speaking to you. There will be some material in the Narthex for you to study.

If you are called to these practices, you must keep in

mind that when John tells us “For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe”, he is not speaking as a 21st Century person. To a 21st Century person, this clause means “For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not assent to the truth of what he is speaking.” That’s what we mean by the word “believe”.

No, Jesus is saying something more like, “For Jesus knew from the first who could not trust in Him because they had not been called by the Father.” Faith is a gift from God, not an act of personal will. It is not given to everyone, but only to those chosen by the Father. Jesus said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

If the gift I have given you, of a way to contemplative prayer and an entrance into lectio divina makes your heart sing, then my joy is without bounds, for you have been allowed to see the glory, the wonder of God’s

hand, and to experience God within. You have become awake to wonders.

We live in a world of wonders made invisible by our own inattention. We drive along wrong roads because we are too stubborn to admit error. Yet, wonders there are, church. Wonders there are.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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