

The Lessons Appointed for Use

on

Proper 12

Year A

RCL



Psalm 119:129-136
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

The Collect

O God, the protector of all who trust in you,
without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy:
Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that,
with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass
through things temporal, that we lose not the
things eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord,

who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Psalm 119:129-136

Mirabilia

- 129 Your decrees are wonderful; *
therefore I obey them with all my heart.
- 130 When your word goes forth it gives light; *
it gives understanding to the simple.
- 131 I open my mouth and pant; *
I long for your commandments.
- 132 Turn to me in mercy, *
as you always do to those who love your Name.
- 133 Steady my footsteps in your word; *
let no iniquity have dominion over me.
- 134 Rescue me from those who oppress me, *
and I will keep your commandments.
- 135 Let your countenance shine upon your servant
*
and teach me your statutes.
- 136 My eyes shed streams of tears, *
because people do not keep your law.

Romans 8:26-39

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he

also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

Jesus put before the crowds another parable:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in

his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

“Have you understood all this?” They answered,

“Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

SERMON

The world in which we live is a mess. The world we are promised is one of peace and light. The question for Christians is this: “What are we to do in the meantime?”

I want to be candid with you. However flattering it might be to imagine that we have the power to correct the mess within which we live, such a notion is just wrong. That is getting way above our raisings. We are, all of us, just cowboys on this ranch, servants of the real power in the world and we go astray when we begin to imagine ourselves above our station. Micah wrote thousands of years ago:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and

what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?¹

That's our role. For us to do our proper part, it is vital that we walk humbly with our God, that we do justice and that we love kindness. It is beyond our power to "fix" the world into something more agreeable to us, yet we are not absolved of responsibility.

"You have only one master now...But with this 'yes' to God belongs just as clear a 'no.' Your 'yes' to God requires your 'no' to all injustice, to all evil, to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and poor, to all ungodliness, and to all mockery of what is holy. Your 'yes' to God requires a 'no' to everything that tries to interfere with your serving God

¹ Micah 6:8

alone, even if that is your job, your possessions, your home, or your honour in the world. Belief means decision."²

We are called to say "no" to all injustice, to all evil, to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and poor, to all ungodliness, and to all mockery of what is holy. With that in mind, let's think about the world in which we live, the sin which infects it, and our place within it.

If you'll forgive me for saying so, I think we denounce sin rather too easily. We think of sin as the bad things other people do out of sheer badness and the unfortunate things we do when provoked. Thus, saving the world from sin becomes a matter of getting people to stop sinning.

If only it were all so simple! If only there

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer

were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?³

You cannot “fix” sin because sin is not just personal but structural and spiritual. It is not simply the result of human actions, but the consequence of huge systems over which no individual has full control.⁴ Think about that for a second. Sin is not just personal but structural and spiritual. I would love to think that I had the power to dismantle the systemic racism which fuels the outrage among people of color, but I cannot. It’s not within my

³ Alexander Solzhenitsyn

⁴ Wink, Walter (2010-02-19). *The Powers That Be* (Theology for a New Millennium)

reach. I recall, decades ago, meeting a black woman of about my age. So help me, I was not aware of what I did, but after shaking her hand, I unconsciously wiped my hand on my trouser leg. She saw it. She smirked at me and said, “It doesn’t rub off, you know.” I’ve carried that guilt ever since. The sin of systemic racism, the teachings of my people, was so deeply buried within me that it moved my hand without my awareness!

The big systemic influences which affect all of us are beyond my reach. I cannot make of them what I would make of them, no matter how pure my motives may be. But I am not called upon to do so. I am called upon to leaven the bread of the world, doing my part, however ineffective it may be.

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

That seems so futile that we leave it for heaven, and instead embark upon a project to remake the world into our idea of how it should be. Immediately, we smash into ourselves, for forcing the world into a mold of our preference will be met with resistance. Resistance, to be overcome, demands that we utilize the very methods we sought to expunge from this sin-filled world. We arm ourselves and utilize violence to overcome the resistance. We see this most clearly in places like Portland. People of color have been treated unfairly for generations. That is one of those big structural sins

of our nation. The death of George Floyd, video taped for all to see, was the touch paper that began the protests, initially peaceful. The police responded to assure that things stayed peaceful. Somebody pushed. Somebody shoved. It doesn't matter on which side of the blue line the shoving and pushing began, the fuse was lit. Each side enlisted violence to overcome the resistance of the other side.

“The ultimate weakness of violence,” observed Martin Luther King, Jr., “is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.” Evil is contagious. No one grapples with it without contamination.

The interesting thing to me is the response of

Portland city government. They did not offer violence in response to violence. The protests devolved into something like a street fair. Was there still property damage? Yes, there was. Did anyone get killed? No, no one did. Then the Federal government sent in anonymous agents in camouflage, armed to the teeth, agents who grabbed people off the streets, hauling them away in unmarked rented vans. Violence again erupted. “The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.”

So, we wish to discourage people from killing others and do so by executing those who kill. We wish to discourage people from stealing from others and do so by stealing from those thieves their

very time on earth. We wish to discourage people from using opioids so we put them in close confinement with other addicts and the results of their addiction in lieu of actual treatment of what is, in reality, a medical problem.

If you are a person like my grandfather Schneider, driven to fix anything which is broken, being a Christian is going to be incredibly frustrating. A person of Christian faith, though, knows

...that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Compared to the seemingly overwhelming influence of sin within the world, our little once a week meetings appear so powerless! What do we think we are about? How can affirming our faith from the Apostle's Creed each week touch the horrors the world presents to us every waking hour? I'll tell you how: Our little meetings do so by affirming that our duty is to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God within a community that echos those duties.

Our world of sin teaches that only might makes right, that only by force can people be made to behave in appropriate ways, that only if we arm ourselves and commit ourselves to violence as the ultimate savior can we be assured safety from the bad

things bad people do in furtherance of the cause of evil. Jesus offers a humble teaching that our hope in the promise of the harvest which will set the world right is our salvation and the source of our strength. How to manage that feat is the challenge of being a Christian.

To call oneself “Christian” is an outrageous thing to do. If you don’t see it as outrageous, you’re not doing it right. To call oneself “Christian” is to proclaim to the world that you live in the hope of the world to come, that you accept no judgment other than that of the Father, that whatever the cost to you in loss of the esteem of those about you, all this is nothing by comparison to the blessings to come.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

We are to leaven a loaf yet to be baked; to uncover the treasure hidden in a field; to reveal a pearl of great price unseen by a world obsessed with violence. Be about your Master's business, church.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be
gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and
give you peace.

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

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