



Mount Olive Devotion

The 18th Week of Pentecost (September 28-October 2, 2020)

Monday

Joshua 24:14-18

¹⁴ “Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷ for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸ and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

These words are thought to have been part of the final sermon that Joshua, the leader of Israel, preached before his death. In this sermon, Joshua emphasized to the people the importance of following Yahweh, the God of Israel, and not the pantheon of gods that were worshipped by the people with whom they shared the land. Notice how the people responded. They *remembered God's mighty acts*. They remembered God's care for them. They remembered how God went before them. For these reasons they said, “We will serve the Lord.” We too are people who live in a land where there are many choices of gods we could serve. Martin Luther reminded us that “whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God.” We must choose, every day, to cling to and confide in Christ. Christ is the One who died and rose again and ascended on high. Christ is the One who said, “And remember, I will be with you always, to the close of the age.” Christ is the One who promised, “I go and prepare a place for you, and I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also.” For all these reasons and many more, we say, along with our ancient forbearers in the faith, “We will serve the Lord.”

Prayer

We praise you, O Christ, for your mighty acts on the Cross and in the Empty Tomb. We are saved through your power and love. We thank you that you continue to be with us and will be even to the end of this age. We thank you for your promise that you go before us and have prepared a place for us. Grant us faith, Gracious Lord. We pray in your holy name. AMEN.

Tuesday

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

These final words in the Gospel of Matthew are sometimes referred to as the Great Commission. You will note that only eleven disciples were commissioned here, Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Jesus, being no longer alive. Note also, that while all these disciples saw Jesus, some still had their doubts about him. We aren't told what particularly they were doubting: his actual presence? his identity? his power? We don't know. What we do know is, despite their doubts, Jesus commissioned them *all* to go forth into the world and disciple others, by baptizing and teaching them. And then he promised to be with them always. It is good to know that God doesn't only pick followers who have no doubts, no reservations, and no questions. Remember that among these eleven was Peter who had denied Jesus, Thomas who had questioned his resurrection, James and John who had argued about who would be greatest in Christ's kingdom, Matthew the former tax collector, and Philip the one who scoffed, saying, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Given the foibles of all these disciples, there is no reason to believe that Christ doesn't call *each* of us to spread God's love and grace to others. Yes, we all have our limitations and little faith, but Christ doesn't care. "Go and make disciples," he says. It is our joy to do this.

Prayer

Loving God, your generosity and forbearance is beyond compare. How can we ever understand it? You call even us, who doubt, who question, who scoff, and who have often denied you. Forgive us for our lack of faith. Grant us boldness and courage to be your voice of grace and mercy in the world. In your precious name we pray. AMEN.

Wednesday

Acts 6:1-6

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. ² And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴ while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." ⁵ What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The first church fight was right in Jerusalem amongst the earliest believers. Imagine that! It turns out, the congregation was growing beyond expectation and some in need were being neglected. When the apostles considered the situation they decided that seven "deacons" should be appointed to do the work of feeding the hungry, thereby leaving them free to preach and teach. This arrangement is still evident today as we have deacons who are ordained to the Ministry of Word and Service, while pastors are ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. What is noteworthy here is that, just as the ministry of preaching and teaching required people who were "full of the Spirit and of wisdom", so the same was required of those doing the work of feeding the hungry. Yes, it's true, both pastors and deacons, and for that matter, *anyone* who serves in any way in Christ's name, needs to be full of the Spirit and of wisdom. We sometimes forget this, thinking that somehow working at a food shelf, or making quilts, or serving on a task force is not spiritual work. This all is spiritual work that God uses for the building up of the people of God and the blessing of the world. Spirit-filled people are required.

Prayer

Thank you, Almighty God, for calling all into service. Thank you for using each of us with whatever gifts we have to bring your word of truth and grace to others. Thank you for using our talents to bless others. Thank you for gifting all with your Spirit and wisdom. Grant us the will and strength to use our gifts well. In Jesus' name. AMEN.

Thursday

Acts 10: 44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

This story, if you have not read it, is a dramatic one. It is the story of the apostle Peter and a God-fearing officer of the Roman army named Cornelius. Go to Acts 10 and you will find it. The story revolves around the notion, common amongst Christ’s earliest followers, that only those who were already part of the Hebrew tradition, either by birth or conversion, could be part of the Christian story. You will note in the snippet above that the Jewish believers who were accompanying Peter were “*astounded* that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out *even on the Gentiles.*” Of course, as we know now, the whole future of the Christian movement depended on it being available to all people; but at the time, this seemed a far-fetched notion. It is often the case that our notions of God’s will are puny compared with God’s. The prophet Isaiah had it right when he said, “Your thoughts are not our thoughts, O God, nor are your ways our ways.” Today we are struggling with all sorts of inclusion issues. Could it be that God’s will is for blacks and whites to worship together? Could it be God’s will that black pastors lead congregations in the ELCA? Could it be God’s will that gays and lesbians be fully included in the whole life of the Church? Could it be God’s will that both women and men be granted equal authority, pay, and voice? It might be the case that we are also astounded that such things could be so, but it might just be that the whole future of the Church rests on these things coming to pass.

Prayer

Give us boldness, Almighty God. Give us courage. Give us a God-sized imagination that allows us to see that your Church is bigger and bolder than anything we could have foreseen. Forgive us for our small-mindedness and prejudice. Help us see and know that your Spirit is available to all. In the name of Christ, we pray. AMEN.

Friday

Romans 1:8-15

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. ⁹ For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, ¹⁰ asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— ¹² or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³ I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴ I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish ¹⁵—hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

We hear in this opening paragraph of Paul's letter to the early Christians in Rome a longing to see them in-person. He says he longs to see them so that he "may share with [them] some spiritual gift to strengthen [them]." Note also that he also longs to see them so that both he and they "may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." In this pandemic time we too long to be present with one another. We long to share gifts with one another, to encourage and support one another, to share our joys and sorrows. We also long to be mutually encouraged, to laugh together, to tell stories, and share wisdom, and yet, like Paul and the Roman Christians, we are prevented from seeing each other in these days. Perhaps God is creating in us a godly longing. Perhaps in this time God is showing us the true treasure that the Church is. Perhaps God is reminding us of how much we need one another. We will someday come together again. We will pray and sing and commune and fellowship together once again. We will hug and greet, laugh and cry, and sit near each other once again. What a glorious day that will be.

Prayer

How we long to be together, Lord. How we long to worship and fellowship, serve and learn as we once did. Help us to trust that, even in this time, you are using all things for your glory. Help us trust that you are teaching us things right now, in this pandemic time, that we could not learn any other way. We are in your hands, All-wise God. Keep us near you. In your precious name, we pray. AMEN.