



Mount Olive Devotion

First Week of Pentecost (June 15 – June 19, 2020)

Monday

Psalm 127:1-2

¹ Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.

Unless the LORD guards the city,
the guard keeps watch in vain.

² It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives sleep to his beloved.

In these two brief verses there is much wisdom. The wisdom here has to do with trying to take responsibility for things which are not ours to take. The wisdom writer says that it is “in vain” that we spend the whole day, from early morning until late at night, in “anxious toil.” That means that an entire day spent worrying about things that we cannot control is a royal waste of time. “Let the Lord build the house; you’re no builder,” says the writer. “Let the Lord guard the city; you’re no army general,” says the writer. On the other hand, there is yet much that we *can* control, and *that* is what we need to spend our time doing. We can make our neighborhoods, our communities, our churches, our schools, and our workplaces more humane and more just by many small acts of courage and kindness. We can change the way we think by listening to stories of people who have often gone unheard. We can renew the spirit of compassion in our nation, if we do the small works of compassion that offer themselves to us each day. Let us commit ourselves to those things that we can do, and leave the rest to God.

Prayer

Thank you, Almighty One, for reminding us that not everything is in our control. Thank you for promising to do the hard work of changing hearts and minds that we cannot change. Free us from our fears that we might have the courage to do and say those things we can say and do, in order that our communities and nation might more nearly resemble the beloved community you envision for us all. In Christ’s name, we pray. AMEN.

Tuesday

Psalm 133

¹ How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
² It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
³ It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the LORD ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.

The first verse of this psalm seems obvious: It is very good and pleasant when God's people get along. How well we know this. When churches are not living in unity everything is difficult. When churches are living together in unity, life is good. Unity of purpose and of mind is a great blessing. And that is the point of the rest of the psalm. Apparently in the early days of the people of Israel, when Aaron, the first high priest was installed in his station and anointed with oil, it was taken as a sign of God's power being given to God's people through Aaron. Similarly when the heavy dew of Mount Hermon was present it would run down the mountainside bringing water to parched places. In both cases, shown through the oil of anointing and in the dew of the morning, blessing from God was assured. This is what unity does, says the psalmist. When God's people live in unity, they receive God's power and God's life-giving blessing. Unity amongst God's people brings even more than that - "life forevermore."

Prayer

Give us your power and blessing, O God. Grant us to live in such unity that the world may know that we are followers of Christ. Take from us strife and bitterness. Eliminate from amongst your people jealousy, envy, greed, hatred, and every evil that causes your people to live in disunity. Grant us your peace. In the name of Jesus, we pray. AMEN.

Wednesday

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

These words are the central confession of faith for Jews. Devote Jews recite verses 4 and 5 twice each day. First comes the reminder that God alone is Lord. There is no other god. There is no other deity or person whom we may worship. Second, we are to love this one true God with everything we are. The Hebrew people pictured a person like a series of concentric circles, starting with “the heart” as the innermost part of a person. We might think today of “the heart” as a person’s mind. The second of the circles was the *nephesh*, translated “soul”. It is hard to distinguish this from the heart, but it essentially is the seat of one’s desires, appetites, and passions. Finally we are to love God, not only with our “heart/mind” and “soul/passions”, but also with all our might. The word ‘might’ is actually a word usually used as an adjective; its basic meaning is abundance. So what we are being commanded to do is to love God with *everything we have* – our abundance. In short, we are to love God from the innermost part of our being to the outermost tips of our fingers and toes, and with everything in between. It takes a lifetime to learn to do this, which is why the Hebrew people recited these verses so often. We would do well to learn from them.

Prayer

Gracious God, you are worthy of all praise and honor. You are worthy of all love. There is no other who is worthy of worship. There is no other God that is so gracious and merciful as you. Give us faith to love you with everything we are, so that all the world may know of your goodness and mercy. In your Holy Name, we pray. AMEN.

Thursday

Matthew 7:24-27

²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

Growing up in a small town can afford many pleasantries to a young person, and one that is well known is the business of finding a hidden spot in a nearby forest and building a secret fort. Many a boy or girl growing up in small town America has known the excitement of gathering the materials necessary to construct such an edifice, and the pleasure of finishing the job. What often happens, however, is that after a while the secret fort loses its appeal and is abandoned. When this happens, often the failures in workmanship appear, and the winds and rain have their way with the structure. Jesus said that when we fail to listen to his words and obey them, we are like children building a rickety treehouse or secret fort. We might believe we are constructing something that will last, but we are mistaken. It will stand only as long as the sun is out and the breezes are light, but when any heavy weather comes, down it goes. Lives built on the words of Jesus, on the other hand, can stand the stress and storms of life. When compassion, mercy, justice, wisdom, generosity, and love are the building blocks of our lives, there is no storm that can blow us down. God’s way has become our way, and in that is great strength.

Prayer

Almighty and All-loving God, help us to build our lives on your Word and Ways. Keep us from hypocrisy and self-deception that would lead us to disaster. Give us sober minds that we might hear how you are leading us, and give us the courage to follow. In the name of Christ. AMEN.

Friday

I Corinthians 12:27 – 13:3

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

13 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

As is well-known, the opening verses of I Corinthians 13 are called “the Gift of Love,” and as such they find their way into many a wedding service. What is not nearly as well-known is that these verses come in the context of the Apostle Paul talking about community life amongst the people of God. The end of chapter 12 makes this clear. Apparently in the church in Corinth, members of the church were competing with one another to see who had the greatest spiritual gifts. Some said that healers were the most gifted, some said prophets were, others said that miracle-workers evidenced the most profound manifestation of the Spirit. Paul said, “Here, let me show you the most important gift; it is the gift of love.” And what’s obvious right away is that compared to love, everything else pales. Sure, speaking in ecstatic spiritual languages is marvelous, but without love, it’s just noise. Having great insight and wisdom and faith is wonderful, but without love it doesn’t amount to a hill of beans. Sure, it’s a wonderful thing when a person is sacrificially generous even to the point of martyrdom, but if we do even that *apart from love*, we have achieved nothing. Pursue love. That’s what the apostle says. That is God’s way and wisdom and will.

Prayer

Loving God, you show us the way to live. You show us what is truly essential. Forgive us for forgetting that finally love is the main thing and everything else is just window dressing. Give us new hearts that are filled with love for you, for your creation, and for all those we encounter. We pray this in Jesus’ name. AMEN.