

Pentecost 16

September 12, 2021

Isaiah 50: 4-9

⁴ The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught.

⁵The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward. ⁶ I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. ⁷ But the Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. ⁸ He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me. ⁹ Behold, the Lord GOD helps me; who will declare me guilty? Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

Psalm 116:1-8

¹ I love the LORD, because he has heard the voice of my | supplication, *
because he has inclined his ear to me whenever I | called upon him.

² The cords of death entangled me; the grip of the grave took | hold of me; *
I came to | grief and sorrow.

³ Then I called upon the name | of the LORD: *
"O LORD, I pray you, | save my life."

⁴ Gracious is the | Lord and righteous; *
our God is full | of compassion.

⁵ The LORD watches o- | ver the innocent; *
I was brought very low, | and he helped me.

⁶ Turn again to your rest, | O my soul. *
for the LORD has treat- | ed you well.

⁷ For you have rescued my | life from death, *
my eyes from tears, and my | feet from stumbling.

⁸ I will walk in the presence | of the LORD *
in the land | of the living

James 3:1-12

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect

man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

Mark 8:27-38

²⁷And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" ²⁸ And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." ³⁰ And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him. ³¹ And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." ³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of

Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Message: Letting Go

Quite a few years ago I was the manager of a lawn service company. One summer I worked with a young high school kid who was very bright, especially in mathematics. He could recite all the algebraic and geometric formulas right off the top of his head. One day we went to measure out a lawn in order to determine how much product we needed to apply. The property was on a cul de sac, and the whole yard was curved! When I asked the young man to figure out how much chemical we would need at the rate of 2 ounces per 1000 square feet, he was stumped! I then asked him what the formula was for determining the area of a circle. He responded correctly: “ πr^2 ”. So I asked him again how much chemical we were going to need. He had no idea how to proceed!

Sometimes simply having the right answer isn't enough! It's one thing to have memorized the formula πr^2 , but it's another thing altogether to know how use it in real-life situations! Application of the formula was more important than simply knowing the formula! This young man needed more teaching and experience in knowing what it meant that πr^2 gives you the area of a circle.

Jesus and the disciples are walking along, and Jesus decides to take a quick public opinion poll – “*Who do people say that I am?*” he asks. It is not a coincidence that he poses this question when he does; they are on their way to Caesarea Philippi – a territory that was renowned for honoring the Greek god Pan and the cult of emperor worship. He was asking the disciples if they knew the attitudes and beliefs of the people of the area into which they were headed.

As expected, the answers range from believing Jesus to be a prophet to the reincarnation of Elijah or a resurrected John the Baptist! But then Jesus asks a more poignant question: “But who do you say that I am?” Perhaps to the surprise of the rest of the disciples, Peter nails it: “You are the Christ!” Good for him – he got the right answer! The problem was that he had no idea what it really meant! Jesus begins to give them the practical application of what it means that he is the Anointed One, the Son of God, and it becomes obvious that Peter and the rest of the disciples only understood the title in theory, but not in application!

The same is often true of us and our understanding of being a disciple. If asked, we can all probably correctly respond that to be a disciple means to follow Jesus. And we would be correct. As before, the problem arises when we are confronted with the practical application of what it means!

Jesus tells us that being his disciple means denying ourselves, saying 'No' to natural, even good inclinations. Jesus tells us that being a disciple means being willing to take up a cross and let go of our lives. He even goes so far as to declare that if we try to avoid that, if we try to save our lives, we'll lose them.

I don't know if that means that I have to be willing to suffer a martyr's death. I certainly hope not, because quite honestly, I don't know how I'd respond if put to that kind of test. I hope I'd be given the strength needed to remain faithful. But maybe Jesus isn't talking just about martyrdom; maybe he's talking about something more – something not just in the future, but here and now.

Throughout the scriptures, God seems to be calling us into something that is outside ourselves – beyond ourselves. We're urged to *have the mind of Christ* (Philippians 2:5), and to *put on the Lord Jesus* (Romans 13:14). Paul reminds us *that in our baptism into Christ we have put on Christ* (Galatians 3:27), that *there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* (Romans 8:1), and finally that *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation* (2 Cor 5:17)!

What Christ Jesus has in mind is not for us to simply be willing to die like he did (Lord, have mercy!), but for us to become him! There's a fancy word for it – theosis, but essentially it means that our old self dies and the new life of Christ Jesus replaces it until the Old Man/Woman is gone completely and only Christ remains! It is a process and there will be bumps along the way. In fact, the biggest hurdle we face is ourselves!

There is an old legend of a South Indian monkey trap. The trap consists of a hollowed-out coconut, chained to a stake. The coconut has some rice inside which can be grabbed through a small hole. The monkey's hand fits through the hole, but his clenched fist can't fit back out. The monkey is suddenly trapped. But not by anything physical. He's trapped by an idea, unable to see that a principle that served him well – "*when you see rice, hold on tight!*" – has become lethal. We can become so rigidly attached to a certain notion that we can't let go when it turns against us. The difficulty lies not in the new idea, but in escaping from the old ones.

The more tightly we hold on to our lives as we understand them, the less open we are to the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. But if we are willing to let loose of what we want so desperately to claim as “ours”, then we become free to become what God in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit wants us to be.

As long as we demand our rights, they remain just that: ours. And we’ll find ourselves chained to the stake of this world, our fist still clenched in the coconut of its delights.

But God’s Word rescues our life from that death, our eyes from tears, and our feet from stumbling so that we may walk in the presence of the Lord now – in the land of the truly living!

Thanks be to God!

THE PRAYERS

Trusting, through the power of the Holy Spirit, in the goodness of our heavenly Father, let us pray in Jesus’ name for the Church, the world, and one another.

A brief silence

Father, thank you for delivering our souls from death, our eyes from tears, and our feet from stumbling. Thank you for your Son, who took on our stumbling, tears, sins, and death, and who gives us his holy and lovely life in return. Thank you for healing us so that we can follow Jesus and share him with the whole world.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Grant that your Church always proclaims Christ crucified and raised from the dead. Let it constantly confess Jesus as your only-begotten Son and beloved Servant, who bears and heals the world’s sin, sorrow, and suffering.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Persecuted Christians throughout the world bear their cross in faithful obedience to Jesus. Sustain, protect, bless, and provide for them. Help us, whose crosses are lighter, to bear their burdens however we can.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Increase the faith of everyone in this congregation, dear Lord. Conform our worship and works to Christ. Use us to bring his healing, forgiveness, and salvation to those who need it most.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Most church programs start now. Bless and prosper all that glorifies you and builds up the Body of Christ. Increase our love of learning, zeal for service, and warmth of spirit. Especially we pray for teachers, discipleship guides, choirs, committees, and all who shine the love of Jesus upon those who do not know him well.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Grant humility and wisdom to the leaders of nations and captains of industry, the giants of culture and icons of sport, the legislators and judges, the researchers, teachers, philosophers, and others who shape our world. Remind them that all they have is from you, given in trust for the benefit of all people. Give everyone the desire and ability to live justly and kindly with each other, despite our differences.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We reflect on the 20th anniversary of 9-11, and pray that never again shall hatred and evil ideology cause such harm anywhere on this poor suffering earth. Beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning-hooks. Soften every heart to receive, cherish, and share your pure, holy love for us, for we are all created in your image and offered forgiveness and salvation through the death and resurrection of your Son.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Sometimes as we pray for loved ones in distress, we are like the father who cried out to you, "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief!" Keep us steadfast in faith as we pray for all who suffer. Remind us all that Jesus has indeed "borne our sickness and carried our infirmity." In his name we pray for Johnnie Feulner, Dean Puffett, Mary Rathe, Amy Cooper, Curt Behrens, Delores Rodela, Mary Ann Helmricks, Pr. James Puotyual, Pr. David Steffenson, Claire Littlefield, and the VansCoy family.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Most holy God, keep in your tender care our beloved dead. Help us to encourage one another in prayer, holy living, faith, and love. Receive us into the glorious company of all the redeemed, who with angels and archangels and all the hosts of heaven, praise and adore you forever – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**