

Note: The first two entries that follow were written in the summer of 2019, before the pandemic began.

Micro-Christianity

There are times when it is overwhelming to be a believer. There are moments when we just look closely at the world surrounding us and wonder where to begin. Everything seems to be falling apart.

But when our vision becomes wide, then the problems become huge. When the problems become huge, then the solutions we consider are also huge. When the solutions are huge, we quickly descend into despair. But some of us will push forward anyway. We will put all of our efforts into trying to fix the world around us to be more “Christian.” The idea is simple; if the world is more Christian, then the

problems just disappear. It's a macro approach to disciple-making; change the system, change the people. The system is composed of civic organizations, like government, so the strategy is to eliminate non-Christian beliefs through legal means.

The recent laws passed by Alabama and a few other states regarding abortions are an excellent example of this strategy. The laws are draconian in structure, with harsh penalties and unrealistic assumptions.

What's more, making a law against something doesn't change attitudes, values, or beliefs. Yet there are so many believers that seem to cling to the hope that making something illegal will convince everyone that it is immoral.

Jesus' directive before His ascension is quite specific if we take the time to study it. The passage is quite well-known among believers:

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

(Matthew 28:16-20)

Verse 19 is the troublesome one here. This verse can easily be interpreted as installing theocracies around the world. I suggest that Jesus meant nothing of the sort. There are two reasons for this: 1) a lot of readers don't really understand what "disciple" means in the original language and have added their own meanings, and 2) the word "nations" has connotations today that the original author did not intend.

The word for "make disciples" is *μαθητεύσατε* (*mathēteusate*), which in this verb tense only occurs here. It means to teach, instruct, and develop something. It portrays one person guiding another into new knowledge and new vision, a relationship-based interaction. It is a "bottom-up" strategy where

cultures are transformed one person at a time. It is micro-Christianity, not macro-Christianity.

Further, the word for “nations” in this passage is *ἔθνη* (*ethnē*). English gets words like “ethnography” and “ethnicity” from this word. The best translation for the word is probably “tribe,” but since modern society has long left historical tribalism in the annals of history, we have chosen the word “nations” as a substitute (i.e., tribes with boundaries). I suggest that Jesus was not telling us to change governments. He was telling us to change people, one at a time, until the shared culture that those people create is consonant with the will and teachings of God. This, again, is micro-Christianity, not macro-Christianity.

Churches that spend all their time and energy on social justice, social movements, political action committees, and the like have got it all completely backwards. The Church of God is not a social service agency, even though it often tries to be because it thinks that is the only way that the non-believer will respect it. But the secular world doesn't want the church to be in that role, and quite frankly, it isn't very good at it anyway. The church is trading away its true and real gift (the transformation of souls by the grace of God through Christ) for a bauble (the transformation of earthly kingdoms). This has to change.

The world around us is doomed to perish. The people in it aren't. Perhaps we should be focusing more on them.

Afraid of the Dark

*There's nothing in the dark that's not there
in the light.*

*Frank Burns, M.A.S.H., "Hawk's
Nightmare" (Season 5, Ep. 14)*

I remember watching M.A.S.H. with my dad when I was a kid. Seems like it was so long ago. Fortunately, modern technology has brought us streaming video services like Netflix and Hulu which allow us to jump into the time machine and watch classic television shows until we can't see straight. I've recently been working my way through this old series, and today I came across the episode quoted above.

Hawkeye Pierce (played by Alan Alda) has begun sleepwalking. He thinks he is a kid again in Maine

and plays out several scenes from his childhood, like playing basketball, marbles, and hopscotch. During the second of these events, he has a terrible nightmare where he watches his childhood friend hit a tree on a sled. As the episode progresses, Hawkeye becomes afraid to sleep. He doesn't want to sleepwalk anymore, and he certainly doesn't want to have any more nightmares. He tries to hang out in the Officers' bar but ends up alone. So he goes to his tent and wakes up Frank Burns (played by Larry Linville), a straight-laced paradox of a character that everyone likes to torment.

Burns tells Hawkeye that when he was little, his dad took away his Popeye night light because "it's dark 12 hours out of 24 each day and I don't want my son to be a coward half the time." Hawkeye then asks if

Frank has ever been afraid to go to sleep. Burns scoffs and then ends the conversation with the quote above. Hawkeye's face after that line is priceless. He is stunned by the profundity of the statement, especially coming from Frank.

I have to admit – I was too. I don't really know how many times I've seen that episode, but that line never hit me like it did today.

A thorough reading of the Bible makes it clear that God realizes how powerful fear can be from the human perspective. He tells us frequently not to be afraid. Jesus prefaced several interactions with the disciples with that admonishment, as if He knew that fear would be the natural response to what was happening. In 2 Timothy 1:7, the writer reminds us

that the Holy Spirit is the opposite of fear – instead of weakness, hatred, and recklessness, it is power, love, and self-discipline. Jesus tells us that we are the “light of the world”, a shining “city on a hill.” We are those things because of the Holy Spirit, which illuminates all that is within and around it.

Nevertheless, some Christians remain afraid. They become convinced that because darkness hides evil things, if they just stay in the light the “dark things” won’t come out. So they stay awake, vigilantly scanning the world around them, desperately trying to avoid closing their eyes. But as Frank Burns so sagely noted, nothing exists only in the dark. When we turn on the bedroom light in the morning, all the things we see in the room were there in the dark, too.

Turning on the light doesn't change that - it only allows us to see those things for what they are.

In the episode, Hawkeye's dreams were connected to something he already knew about himself but was trying to suppress; he hated the war and he was afraid of dying. He just didn't want to think about it. He thought that if he stayed "in the light," he wouldn't have to deal with the "dark things." He learned that his nightmares weren't the problem - they were just the messengers.

When the Spirit turns on the lights in our hearts, there will be things there that scare us. We've always known about them. We've tried to keep them from God, hold onto them for ourselves. We may be ashamed of them. We may have so many regrets. We

may feel useless or out of control. So we tell the Spirit that He can have most of our soul, but He really doesn't want to open "that door." So fear of "that door" begins to breed and fester because we have denied God access. Eventually it becomes so strong that we feel weak, helpless, and reckless. We find ourselves further and further from God because His light shows us too much of what we have tried to pretend wasn't there. We turn off our own lights, because there are things we just don't want to see.

Maybe we've forgotten that if we are truly the light of the world, then the darkness flees from us. Light and shadow cannot exist together. There is no fear of the dark anymore, because God's spirit shows all things for what they are.

Don't be afraid to go to sleep. Nothing can hurt us there anymore because of the light that we have through Him.

March 29, 2020

Good Sunday morning, believers and non-believers alike. As this [pandemic] continues to unfold, I want to change tone every week at this time to one of faith.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Mt. 6:19-21)

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and in his joy he went and sold

all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he found one very precious pearl, he went away and sold all he had and bought it." (Mt. 13:44-46)

The word "treasure" in the first verse comes from the word that we translate "tithe." Over the years, the word "tithe" has become about giving to churches, and that means money. I'd like to suggest to you that what Christ was saying here should not be reduced to that, nor should it only be considered in terms of intangible things, like time, effort, and helping others. All of those things are nice and definitely needed by the church, but they are not the point in themselves.

The word appears again in Matthew 13, referring to something greater – “the kingdom.” What if Jesus is asking us to “tithes the kingdom”? Perhaps our money, our talent, our effort, and anything else we give to others or to the church is meaningless unless it ultimately points back to the Kingdom. Yes, all of those things help others in the here and now, but the here and now is just a fleeting image of the eternal. No matter how great we make this world, it still eventually dies. All that will remain is the Kingdom.

All of the things we are being asked to do right now (or not do) [because of the pandemic] are annoying, to be sure. I really feel sorry for all the extroverts. It is annoying to sacrifice things that we like to do, freedoms that we like to have. Still, today, take a moment and ask yourselves some questions.

“Am I tithing the Kingdom to others, or am I just losing things I want?”

“Do I ‘socially distance’ with anger and a sense of injustice, or do I take this opportunity to show the patience and perseverance of Christ?”

Christians, don’t forget that you have found something that is more valuable than anything else in the world, pandemic or not. How are you giving it away every day, even to those that will not see it as valuable at all?

Situations like this should make every one of us ask where are “treasure” is, whether believer or not. I

hope you will have the courage to ask that question of yourselves and accept the answer.

April 5, 2020

Good morning, everyone, no matter your faith or beliefs. Since it is Sunday, I want to bring a message of faith.

Today I want to focus on a subject that all of us, no matter our beliefs, must face. There are at least 400 mentions of this in both the OT and the NT, with a few different intended meanings, and it's something that all of us know well.

Fear.

Why fear? Let's set the Bible aside for a just a moment to understand. Psychologists build models of human behavior, and we have done so with emotions as well. The most accepted model of emotion includes six

“basic” ones: fear, anger, disgust, sadness, joy, and surprise/interest. Generally, emotion experts agree that the most powerful of these, all things being equal, is fear. Fear can motivate behavior all by itself, without any conscious thought or planning. It can trigger the “fight or flight” response, it can paralyze, and it is often at the root of many psychological maladies like depression and hostility. A past professor of mine once said that he could boil down any client he’d ever had in his counseling office to two statements: “I’m hurt”, “I’m afraid”, or both. I’ve come to believe that he was largely correct.

In our current global situation, there is fear everywhere. It gives birth to anger, disgust, sadness, and other emotions. Because emotions can help to motivate actions, we will feel the impulse to act in

ways that are triggered by the fear we feel, and often those behaviors will amplify it further. Almost every creature on earth operates on the same rule of thumb: “If we can get away, we will.” That is our first impulse. But what do we do if we can’t run, if there isn’t anywhere to go? Then we usually fight, no matter if the battle is winnable or not.

In the Bible, the word translated “fear” has many meanings but they can be roughly grouped into two broad categories. In the Old Testament especially, “fear” is often meant as “reverence”. It is a realization of how much more powerful God is than we are. The Psalms are full of songs about this kind of “fear”.

But today, I am talking about the second category, an emotion that occurs when we are threatened by

something that we believe can hurt us, either physically or psychologically. We “fear” the big test and we “fear” the rabid dog. These are different threats, but the same fear. One commonly-used word for fear in Greek is where we get our word “phobia.” Jesus says:

*“So do not be **afraid** of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be **afraid** of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be **afraid** of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one*

*of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be **afraid**; you are worth more than many sparrows." (Matthew 10: 26-31).*

Jesus had just informed the Twelve that they were being asked to preach a message to the region that was not going to be welcomed. He knew how fear worked in humans. The disciples would likely be more worried about saving what they already had, like their lives, their comfort, and the way of life they knew, and that would interfere with His command to spread the Gospel. You can hear the little voice in their heads:

Jesus wants us to go "all-in" on this?

So how did Jesus help them manage? You have to go backwards in time a little, to the beginning of his speech.

“Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.” (Matthew 10:1).

They had just received a direct gift from Christ, power that could only come from Him, power that had already and would surely continue to terrify the entire Jewish nation (for a variety of reasons), and power that none of the disciples probably ever believed they could possess. It was simply too incredible to be true, right? It probably felt to them like Jesus was telling them to fight the lions in the

Coliseum with a magic spoon. So He reminded them in Matthew 10:26-31 of three things.

- 1) He reminded them of the absolute truth of what they were being asked to proclaim. Telling them “in the dark” doesn’t mean because of shame or self-consciousness, it means that the Jewish nation was “dark” to who He was. Jesus wasn’t starting some secret society or lurking in some hideout. He was telling them that no matter what anyone said or did, the truth that they proclaimed was stronger. Even today, we must remember to cling to the Truth, no matter what storm rages around us and what fear it tries to create.

2) He reminded them that all we are and all we have only means something in light of that Truth. Do not be afraid of being killed, Jesus said. Really? That sounds pretty scary if you ask me. But Jesus wasn't saying that death shouldn't be scary; otherwise, why bring it up at all? He knew that fear of death is a powerful motivator. So He showed the disciples that this life and eternity are different, and that the days we live here are about preparing the way for the new Kingdom by inviting people into it, no matter how many of those days we get. He showed them that the truth they proclaimed wasn't about changing this material world, but about building and populating the new Kingdom of God.

Jesus told them that there is only one source of fear - "the One." In the original language, this is just a pronoun with no object. So did Jesus mean God or someone else? If Jesus was referring to God, it would be the only place anywhere in the Bible that God was directly referenced in such a way without a clear reference for that pronoun in the same verse. No, he was referring to the evil one, the ruler of this earth, and the author of fear. Today, the message is no different - fear (*phobos*) is not of God and never has been. It is the perversion of reverence, a lie that Satan has used since the beginning, to get us to take our eyes away from Truth.

3) He reminded them of their eternal value. In His words about sparrows and hairs on our heads, He reminded them that they are beyond the value of all creation, no matter how far our rebellion has taken us from Him and no matter how much distortion our rebellion has created in this world. "The One" wants to convince us that there is no way back, that we are too far away, and that God has left us out here to perish. But Jesus reminded them that their value in God's eyes has never changed, no matter how painful the journey back to God becomes.

Today, it's never been about the virus. That is a natural phenomenon, a part of this earthly system and the way it works. Instead, the virus is a catalyst to

remind us that it is always about whom you will serve. Is fear your master? Then you will run and hide, you will lash out in anger, and you will descend into despair. God, however, is the Master of fear, exposing it for what it is, and comforting us in the midst of it. This breeds courage, boldness, and confidence, as it ultimately did in a handful of ordinary men surrounded by an unbelieving and hostile nation.

Stand on the truth.

Know what that truth means for you eternally.

Know that your value to God is priceless.

And do not be afraid.

April 12, 2020

Good Easter morning. I am participating in my church's livestream this morning, so I have to be brief.

But I wanted to share an important passage on this important day.

"For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" (Gal. 2:19-21)

Christianity is the only religion that I know of that essentially says this about its central figure.

It's not enough that Jesus was a great teacher.

It's not enough that Jesus was a moral man.

It's not enough that Jesus healed people.

No. Paul says, "Jesus, and all of Christianity after Him, is the Resurrection. If that is not true, then everything else is a lie."

I believe in a Risen Christ that placed the entirety of the eternal world on His shoulders, and did what only He could do. My prayer for everyone is that, as believers, you never forget the immense importance of this moment, and for non-believers, that one day you will see that He did this for you, too.

April 19, 2020

I hope you will indulge me for a moment. This is a personally poignant day.

On this day 25 years ago, I sat on the bottom floor of the library at the University of Central Oklahoma. As the crow flies, it is a building about 15 miles north of the downtown Murrah Federal Building site. About 9:00 AM on that morning, Timothy McVeigh, a former military explosives expert, drove a truck filled with ammonium nitrate and plastic explosives in front of the building. The truck was packed with blast shields to direct the shockwave into the building most effectively. The blast yield was equivalent to 5,000 pounds of TNT. I heard a loud bang and the south-facing windows and doors of my building shuddered.

Fifteen miles away. It sounded like something heavy had fallen on the roof. I went back to my work.

About two hours later, I stood in the second floor hallway of a building called Old North on campus. A television had been positioned there, and for the first time, I saw what had happened. Two weeks previously, my wife and I had visited the Social Security office in that federal building, right across the hall from the building's daycare.

Two weeks later, many of those people we saw there were dead.

McVeigh said he did it because he didn't believe in this country anymore. He needed to kill Americans to get Americans to wake up to the truth. He most likely

believed that until his dying breath. In his mind, he was a hero, but in the eyes of others, he was an anti-hero.

Remarkably, out of darkness came light. Rescue workers came by the hundreds. Lives were snatched out of the smoldering wreckage. Food was delivered free in many cases to these people who were risking their lives and donating their time. Ordinary citizens came together to do whatever they could. There was no race, no ethnicity, and no prejudice on that scene. There were just people, helping people.

And across the street, not 30 yards from where the truck was parked, stood an American elm. It was called the "Survivor Tree" by residents at that time. While it was still standing, it was shredded, impaled

with glass, and burned. Most of us thought it was dead and just hadn't fallen. In fact, it was almost cut down for evidence. But the next spring, it bloomed.

When the Memorial was built in downtown Oklahoma City, it was required that the tree be a part of it. There are trees all over the country now that are direct descendants of the tree that stood firm in that moment of evil. There is even one in San Angelo, on the west end of Summit Lane.

I planted it there.

When life explodes around us, we will be damaged, we will be hurt, and there will be parts of us that never return as they were. The Murrah Building was gone. 168 people were gone. Our sense of security in

our own home was shaken. But no matter what, through the love of God and the strength of our faith and hope, we can get back up. We can move forward. We can persevere. And we can bloom again. For I am persuaded that no act of evil can separate us from Him.

April 26, 2020

Good morning to all my friends, believer and not. It's Sunday, and I want to always begin Sundays with a faith-based post.

It seems like all we do right now is wait. It's been since the first week in March now that society has closed – Spring Break week in Texas, oddly enough. That's about 48 days or so. Society has suffered greatly in health, in economics, and in mental health. In a sense, we have been exiled to a bizarre Coronavirus world. The invader has arrived and carried us off to a way of life that we don't understand and that we don't like. While a small number of us on the “front lines” work to keep things afloat, most of us do what little we can to stay sane and not just break down and give up.

I think Israel probably felt like this a lot. For a while there in the Old Testament, it seems like every time you turn around, Israel was thumbing its nose at God; doing things they shouldn't do, diluting or ignoring God's laws. What's more, it didn't seem to matter how many times that course of action led to pain and suffering, usually at the hands of other invading nations. They just kept stepping in it. The prophets kept telling them, over and over, what mistakes they were making, but no one cared because things seemed to be going well for everyone. Suddenly, before they knew what was happening, it had all come crashing down, and they were once again forced to accept their own powerlessness and cry out to God for salvation.

How many of us today feel like that? While the virus is just a natural phenomenon, it does feel something like an invader, doesn't it? What should **we** do now?

Too many of us are turning on each other. Domestic violence and child abuse cases are rising. Social media has taken a toxic turn. Death is being used for political capital. Good people have begun talking like hate-filled bigots and finding people to scapegoat, even though the words sound pure. Violence against Asians has increased. People are eating heartworm medication, ingesting disinfectants, and making other outlandish medical claims, looking for the "way out." We have become the animal trapped in the cage that spends hours and hours trying to find the exit, until we finally just lay down in a corner and lament our inability to do so.

Isaiah had to deal with the petulance of Israel a lot. He wrote many messages to the nation about how they had gotten to where they were and what they should be doing now. Perhaps one of the most well-known admonitions is Isaiah 40, which ends in verse 31:

*“Yet those who wait for the LORD will gain
new strength; they will mount up with
wings like eagles, they will run and not get
tired, they will walk and not become weary.”*

In the midst of the chaos, in the center of hopelessness, in the throes of despair, when all of Israel is crying out to God and wondering where He went, Isaiah says to “wait.” But this is not an “off-

putting” kind of waiting. It isn’t Isaiah telling the Israelites that they’ve made their own beds, so they should lay in them. The word in Hebrew is a specific kind of waiting.

It is the kind of waiting that children do on Christmas Eve.

It is the kind of waiting that a partner does for the inevitable marriage proposal.

It is the kind of waiting that expectant parents do for that moment when it’s time to go to the hospital.

It is the kind of waiting that rests in the hope that life’s trials will end, and that we will emerge from them as a people, but also that there is something we should learn in the process.

Have you considered that perhaps this pandemic is a great opportunity to re-align your priorities with that of God? Have you thought that maybe this is a new chance to remove the idols from your life? Have you wondered that maybe this is your moment to look inside yourself and challenge things that have compromised your faith?

Instead of frantically running around, looking for an escape hatch that probably isn't actually an escape, maybe it's just time...to wait.

If you are a believer, then your hope is not in this world. We could stay in the cage forever and nothing would change that reality. The world can take everything from us, but it can't take what truly matters, and that is that hope on which we wait. But

we will lose that hope if we remove our eyes from God and turn them inward onto our own self-pity and helplessness.

So, what are you looking at?

May 3, 2020

Good Sunday. As per usual, before talking about the [pandemic virus] data, I want to post something on faith, with an attempt at trying to make it accessible to all, believer and those who are not. The topic today is faith.

Paul writes in Hebrews 11:

*“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped
for, the conviction of things not seen.”
(Hebrews 11:1).*

This is a definition of faith, clearly, but the other key words in the verse are “assurance” and “conviction.” To be honest, translators seem to struggle with those words. “Assurance” has been changed in English to

words like “reality”, “substance”, and “confidence”, while “conviction” has been changed in English to “assurance”, “certainty”, “evidence”, and “proof.”

This is due to the nature of the Greek language. The Greeks made extensive use of suffixed and prefixed qualifiers to words that make the word translate differently into English. By contrast, English tends to use the same word for multiple meanings which must be determined by the context surrounding the word. That makes translation a difficult business.

So in English, this verse sounds suspiciously like “faith is believing something even though there is no evidence for it.” Indeed, a lot of non-believers and believers alike think that is what Paul is saying here. That’s a shame. It means nothing of the sort.

The first word is “faith” (*pistis*). In secular Greek writing, the word was commonly used to describe a guarantee from someone who had authority and power to deliver on that guarantee. It was often rooted in an agreement between the parties that what was promised by one would be delivered. Thus, the faith that Paul describes here is not an individual decision to believe whatever we want for whatever reasons we have or without any reason to do so. Faith is grounded in a persuaded belief that the other party will do (or has done) what was promised. Faith is only as good as the God to whom it is connected.

So for Christians, “faith” means that we have accepted God’s persuasive arguments about who He is, who Jesus was, and what it means to accept Him – the changing of our identity, the indwelling of the

Holy Spirit, and the membership in His Kingdom, for instance. But it is true that none of those things can be directly experienced with our five senses by any of us in this reality. God never said they could be. Instead, He provided “evidence” of His guarantee in the person and life of Jesus.

When people call Jesus “a great teacher”, there is truth in that. It’s an incomplete description, but it’s not wrong because He did teach us many things. He taught us about the eternal promise of God, the gift of salvation, by behaviorally exemplifying it in a reality that we could see, touch, and perceive. We watched Him live entirely for God, we saw Him follow God to death, and we saw Him overcome that death to establish the Kingdom that was promised.

“God so loved the world” and wanted us to believe in Him, not blindly or foolishly but based on persuasion, that He entered our world and even sacrificed Himself to do it.

So we are “assured” (*hypostasis*). The word means “to stand under a guarantee” or to claim a “title of possession.” In our modern times, a deed to a house might trigger a state of *hypostasis*. Because we have been persuaded by God’s arguments and we have chosen Him, He has guaranteed to us based on that decision all of His promises made through the life of Christ.

So we are “convicted” (*elenchos*). The word usually meant to describe the act of convincing someone of something through solid evidence, like a geometry

proof. It could also be used to demonstrate to someone that they are in error about something. It is noteworthy that the word is only used in the way this verse uses it twice in the entire NT – once by Timothy, where he is describing how the Word of God can “convict” us of our errors, and here by Paul. It means that faith is not a one-way street. It means that faith is not just accepting God’s guarantees, but accepting our need for them, and accepting that through that faith, God can reveal truth and shine light on our error.

In essence, Paul is telling us that faith in God requires a loss of faith in ourselves.

So Christians have faith in two things, according to this definition. We are assured that God has lived up and will live up to His promises and gifts when he

accept Him, and we are convicted that we desperately need those promises and gifts because of our inability to attain them ourselves. Both must be there, or faith is just a placeholder for fantasy.

In this trying time, what is your faith grounded on?

Your own perceptions and desires or God's promises?

Your own expectations about what "should be" or

God's promises about "what is"?

Your five senses, or God's words?

Is what you hope for still what it was when you first believed?

I hope and pray that it is.

May 10, 2020

Good morning. As per usual, on Sundays I will start with a post on faith for all audiences, believers and not. This one's a little longer but I hope it blesses you.

What does it mean to be "safe"? Today in America, the word "safe" is very popular. Everyone has their opinion about whether we are "safely" managing the virus, "safely" opening businesses, or "safely" rejoining society. There are several English words in the Bible that refer to being safe, such as "saved", "delivered", "rescued", "secured", and so on.

Christians even call the moment of their acceptance of Christ "being saved." "Safety" is a powerful incentive for humans. We all want to experience it, all the time. So...what is it, and how do we know we have it?

Is it building walls around ourselves so that incoming threats cannot reach us? Is it eliminating the threat completely? Is it removing ideas, things, and people from our lives so we don't have to acknowledge their existence anymore or be threatened by them? Is it micro-managing every small aspect of every segment of our lives to avoid any deviations or errors?

Is it something that you **do** or something that you **are**?

The New Testament (NIV) contains the English word "safe" 11 times. The word never describes a state of being, such as being locked away inside an impenetrable fortress that no one can assail. Instead, they describe activities that we might do, such as guarding, preserving, and rescuing. That is more

critical than just semantics, because the inference is that there are always threats to our safety that must be acknowledged. This means that whatever “safety” we perceive in any situation is only as good as the strength of the guarantor compared to the impending threats.

I am “safer” from a tornado in a concrete shelter **assuming** that the shelter is well-made. I am “safer” from a bullet when wearing a Kevlar vest **assuming** that the bullet hits the vest and that the vest is made properly. You see, “safety” isn’t something you have – it’s something that must emerge from the choices you make, every day, choices that do not eliminate risks but only manage them. Risk must always be part of the equation because there is no earthly entity that can universally and completely remove it.

Arguing about whether it is “safe” enough to open businesses or go to parks [because of the virus] is a waste of time because the premise of the argument (“safety”) is not a state of being. It’s not like the oven announcing with a loud noise when it’s hot enough to start cooking the pizza. You and I must decide how safe we are and what precautions are necessary. We should do things to create safety, but we often do things because we believe we **have** safety (or not). This leads to self-fulfilling prophecies like the ones I outline below:

“I think it’s safe, therefore...”

“I behave based on that belief, and...”

“Nothing bad happens to me, which confirms that I was actually safe.”

Or...

“I think it’s not safe, therefore...”

“I behave based on that belief, and...”

“Nothing bad happens to me which confirms
that I was not safe before.”

See how both lines of thought lead to the same
conclusion?

So many Christians live a frustrating life because we misunderstand “safety.” We start including things into the list of what God has “saved” for us that don’t belong there. We choose to believe that God has “saved” (or “will save”) our health, our finances, our sense of security, our way of life, our country, but none of that is necessarily true. The only thing God

has secured in us is that which is eternal. Our “safety” here on this planet is not part of the deal. And even so, God’s “safety” is contingent on our daily acceptance of His promise **despite** the threats that rage on around us, because He never promised to remove them. In fact, the Biblical authors make it very clear that our “salvation” in no way guarantees invulnerability on this earth.

In I Thessalonians 5:1-11, the author writes this about the return of Christ:

“Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction

will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or

asleep, we may live together with him.

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."

Did you notice that our "safety" in this passage is portrayed as preparing for war? Putting on breastplates and armor? Staying vigilant and clear-headed, not passively saying "peace and safety"? Our salvation in Christ is the most secure condition imaginable in an eternal sense, but still the message is not, "Now that you're safe, you needn't worry about anything happening to you."

Instead, the message is, "Prepare. Resist. Brace."

Instead of passively reveling in the false perception that we are safe and protected, we must act to create

that safety through the armor of God. We are most “safe” when we realize, fully, how vulnerable we can be, at a moment’s notice.

If you’ve lived your life always chasing “safety”, always building more walls around you, trying to control everything around you, or refusing to acknowledge anything that doesn’t fit your worldview so that you can feel “safe”, maybe you’re chasing after the wind. Running away only creates the illusion of safety. Instead, stand firm in God, prepare yourself with the Word, and face the threats head on, knowing that no matter what damage you take in this life, He has rescued that which matters.

May 17, 2020

Good Sunday morning. As always, I encourage all believers and non-believers alike to read.

Yesterday, I had a discussion with someone on Twitter about the “literal Adam” hypothesis. (*Don't be afraid – that's just for context. I'm not debating that here*).

What I wished I would have asked him at one point, however, was this: “Do you consider yourself to be an expert on your faith?”

So I'll ask you – do you?

Cognitive psychologists have a rule of thumb about expertise. If someone wants to be “expert” in a skill or a discipline, it requires at least 10,000 hours of deliberate practice (that number is a little variable, but

it makes the point). After this substantial investment of time and effort, expertise has a number of benefits. For skills, these include accuracy, consistency, and adaptability of performance. For knowledge, the expert has a deep conceptual and synthetic understanding of the field and its applications. To borrow the old proverb about the five blind men and the elephant, the expert is able to understand the entire elephant, not just the small piece of it that is currently being touched.

So given that definition, I'll ask you again - are you an expert in your faith? Is your Bible a deeply-embedded part of who you are?

Jesus modeled this for us in Matthew. His time with the Evil One in the desert is more than just an

uplifting account of triumph. Christ showed us what it would take for us to be in the desert one day.

Sometimes I fear we read this story too glibly, not realizing that the challenges presented to Jesus during those moments would probably shatter many Christians today in the same circumstance.

As short as the story is, it is tempting to see it as inconsequential. But Satan's challenges to Jesus were not easy. They were positively devious. Turning stones into bread was not against the Law and well within Jesus' capability. Not only that, He was hungry. Psalms 91 does actually say what Satan recited, though the meaning of the passage was intentionally distorted. And, Jesus' purpose on earth was to build a Kingdom; Satan's offer probably seemed like it would have made that easier to do,

without the need for nasty details like crucifixions.

Satan didn't throw softballs; he didn't ask Jesus to do blatantly evil things or deny God overtly. And he doesn't do that to us today.

Christ's answers showed that He understood exactly what Satan was really doing. First, he attempted to subtly influence Jesus to see earthly comfort and faith in God as mutually exclusive, that one can temporarily set God's instructions aside if it means that we can feel better right now. Second, he tried to conflate literal and figurative language from the psalm and influence Jesus to do something that, no matter the outcome, would have weakened God (an Epicurean challenge well before Epicurus). Third, he wanted Jesus to unilaterally redefine God's Kingdom in earthly terms, thus making the upcoming

crucifixion and Resurrection unnecessary. Without the expertise in the Word that Jesus possessed, He would have failed.

While I realize that none of us will ever be quite so expert as He is, Jesus was showing us that we must know our faith deeply, clearly, and intimately in order to stand firm against temptation. We must be ready at all times to see the very subtle and clever deceptions and subtexts of the Evil One for what they are, and we can only do that if we understand the Word far beyond reciting favorite memory verses or quoting our favorite pastors or Christian authors.

God is not a God of deception. Everything in this world points to Him, even the things that humans have subverted, perverted, and turned into idols. In

the same way, everything in the Word is connected. It is all part of the same elephant. Without that understanding, our times in the desert will not turn out so well. Peter reminds us of this in his first letter.

“If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.” (I Pet 4:11).

The world today is a little bit of that desert. We see pain and turmoil all around us. We see people hurting physically, economically, and emotionally.

We feel weak, helpless, angry, and sad. The voice then comes: "Where is your God now?"

What will your answer be? Empty platitudes about God that you've recited hundreds of times but are just hollow? Or will you see what that deceptive voice is really trying to do? Will you see the trap that is carefully being laid for you? Will you stand in your faith because you know it is real, or because you just have nothing better at the moment?

Whose words are you speaking?

May 24, 2020

Welcome to Sunday. It's a nice, rain-cooled morning here - I hope it's nice where you are as well. My habit is to start Sundays with a faith-based post, so I hope all readers find it useful.

One of the passages in the story of Christ's crucifixion that has always interested me is Peter's denial of Jesus. All four gospels tell the story, albeit with some minor differences, but the basic elements are the same. Peter remains outside the area in the Temple where Jesus would be interrogated, sitting by a fire. He is accused three times by different people of being one of Jesus' followers, and he flatly denies it each time. Then he hears a rooster crowing, and Jesus' prediction that he would do what he just did was complete.

My interest is not in the “wow, Jesus knew that would happen” sense, although that is pretty impressive. Instead, I am intrigued by the fact that I can absolutely understand why Peter did what he did. According to the accounts, he and John were the only two disciples to go with Jesus to the high priest (John is only mentioned in his gospel, and even then not by name). As events unfolded, Peter realizes that he is alone among a throng of people that were out for Jesus’ blood. It would have been like a member of a criminal gang sitting outside the courthouse among the victim’s families. Most everyone there saw Jesus as a blasphemer and a troublemaker and wanted Him dead, and Peter was guilty by association.

Peter was an uneducated, poor fisherman that would have been easy prey for the teachers of the law, had they chosen to pounce. So why didn't they? Why not judge and execute all the disciples? We will never really know, but I imagine that Peter must have felt an incredible amount of dissonance about that. He knew he was guilty of following the "blasphemer" but for some reason the authorities were ignoring him. He had even attacked a guard in the garden as Judas perpetrated his betrayal, but no one seemed to care. It must have confused Peter as to why he was not being arrested as well. Jesus was going to die, and Peter was going to walk.

So he sat alone, despite being surrounded by people. He warmed himself by a fire and surely wondered how things had gotten to this point. He'd followed

Jesus passionately, but what if all that was a lie? Was he really convinced of what Jesus was teaching?

Maybe there was a part of him that still thought Jesus was a political, earthly revolutionary that would teach those Romans a lesson, and now He was being exposed as a fraud.

All we can do is wonder about those things, but what we do know is that when you are alone, social pressure can be overwhelming. When humans find themselves surrounded by other humans who all have the same opinion and the same voice and it is different than ours, it is very difficult to oppose them when we are alone. I think Jesus knew that His arrest would scatter His disciples, men who were strong together but not yet ready to be so alone. He knew Peter, as obstinate as he was, would feel a strong

temptation to just let all of this play out, stay under the radar, and hope that no one would remember all those times that he stood by Jesus' side. You see, it was easy to tell Jesus that He was wrong about the rooster when he was among friends, to dismiss Jesus' prediction as folly, and to claim that he would not deny Him. But when we're alone...all that changes.

I honestly believe that Peter did "forget" about the rooster, as the story says, but based on the story in Mark (likely Peter's own words), I think he always had an inkling. The first accusation leveled at him brings a response of "I don't know what you are talking about." Note that this is an indirect denial, a way that he could avoid the question without specifically mentioning Jesus or making any assertions. Then he left the courtyard. This is a critical

point and a sign that he was trying to escape the social pressure of the moment. He wanted to be truly alone. The second denial doesn't have a quote from Peter, but finally the third denial brings a stark and clear assertion, directly denying Jesus on penalty of a curse.

Peter had broken under the weight of the pressure. He had chosen safety in the moment over the strength of his conviction and his friendship with Jesus.

I believe he wept because he realized that he had been lying to himself this whole time about how strong he was. He wept as he stared at his helplessness and fear.

Jesus told us many times that standing with Him would bring pain. It would bring revulsion from the world. It would bring doubt and sorrow. It would mean feeling alone in a throng of those who were content to sacrifice the truth for their own immediate comfort here on earth. Every day that we live here, we sit in that courtyard are asked to compromise what we believe. And just like Peter, most days, we hear the rooster crow. But God's grace is greater than those failures.

Peter learned that firsthand in John 21 when Jesus gave him the responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel after He would be gone, telling him that he would be the "rock" upon which the church would be built. Let that sink in for a bit. Jesus handed the shepherd's staff over to the man that couldn't even

stand up to an angry accusation from a child. If He would do that, then I know that He will have grace for me when I fail, too.

I hope that you will find God's grace in your life every day and refuse to live in the shadow of your past, like Peter chose to do.

May 31, 2020

Good Sunday morning. There's a lot on my heart today, and I want to share it, but I think I'm going to "edit myself" this time. So, here is a little tidbit for you to consider.

When Jesus was arrested, He was treated as unfairly as we can imagine. He was not afforded rights. He was detained on no viable charge. He was beaten and mistreated even after being found innocent by the Romans, and then sentenced to die for no crime. He had no lawyer or advocate; in fact, his only advocates ran away. He had every "right" to demand His freedom because He had done nothing wrong. Pilate basically told him so. But He never claimed those rights, and I think it was because He knew they were ultimately worthless. He took them to the cross with

Him and showed us that the **real** Kingdom isn't based on what we deserve, but what we are given through grace.

Jesus' death and resurrection mean that we can be a member of the Kingdom anywhere we are, anywhere we live, whether we have money or we are poor, whether we can worship freely or whether we can't, whether we have physical comfort or we don't, whether we are treated fairly or we are not, whether we can speak freely or whether we can't, whether we have freedom or whether we don't. Those things are wonderful, and humans like to see them as "rights", but they are not ours. We are allowed to exercise them as long as those in power consent to it. Thus, every breath we take and every moment we live is a privilege, granted by God through those He places in

power. We can choose to spend those moments chasing after the wind, or we can spend them in the security of knowing that our home is elsewhere, in a Kingdom that doesn't require "rights" to function.

Believers, don't lose your "first love." Don't take the promises of God for granted. When we do, we become cold, bitter, and always searching for something else to make us feel better. This world has nothing that can do that...not "rights", not "fairness", nothing. It's only found in Christ.

June 7, 2020

Good Sunday morning. I've been thinking this morning about my message to you. There are literally hundreds of things to say, most of which would probably get me into trouble. So I think I'll just do something simple.

A couple of days ago I posted [on social media] a picture of a mirror with the verse that talks about removing the plank from our own eyes. I said that we must do that every day, because the plank always comes back. So, I want to talk now about what Jesus said before those comments about the plank.

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged.

For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you

*use, it will be measured to you.” (Matthew
7:1-2)*

Humans have long distorted this instruction, both believers and those whom are not. Those first three words are so well-known to many, but the rest of the passage has just faded into obscurity as time has passed. I believe Jesus knew this would happen with His teachings; that humans would “selectively remember” the parts they liked. So he told parable after parable and used metaphor after metaphor to get the point across. The Pharisees on the street corner, the Good Samaritan, the plank and the speck...all of these tell the same story:

You may judge others if you wish – but the judgment will come back to you in kind.

You may create “us” versus “them” perceptions – but be ready to be seen as the “them.”

Christ never said not to judge. He said if you do it, then it will be likewise done to you. If you identify the speck, then you should be prepared for your plank to be identified as well.

But the Pharisees weren't prepared. They saw themselves as separate, religiously advanced from the “others”, more intelligent, more capable, God's chosen, and so on. Through Jesus' words, they learned how foolish they were in those beliefs.

The Jews weren't prepared, either. They saw the Samaritans as half-breeds, they called them “dogs”, and they shunned them. They saw the Romans as

unredeemable agents of evil who deserved nothing but being conquered and destroyed. They saw the lame and the crippled as suffering justly for their sins. They saw women as second-class persons. Christ showed them differently.

Whom did Jesus ask for water? A Samaritan woman. Whom did Jesus minister to and heal? Anyone who needed it, regardless of heritage or tribe. Who were the first witnesses to Christ's empty tomb? Women.

The Bible tells us a couple of times that the Pharisees were upset that Jesus would say that He was forgiving sins, but in their eyes He was also doing that every time he healed someone. Almost everything He did and said, to the Pharisees and teachers of the law, was blasphemy because they

weren't ready to see it otherwise. Not because it was, but because they wanted it to be, they **needed** it to be, because they were unwilling to look in the mirror and remove their own planks.

I have learned through my marriage and through my job that I must each day remove my planks...and I know that I have them. I don't like to look at them, and sometimes it takes me a while to realize I've found one, but they are there. But I've also learned that you can't just do it once. You can't take inventory today and then not look in the closet again for months.

Because, infuriatingly, they grow back. They never die. They are never defeated on this earth. The only

reason I can claim victory over them in any way is because of Christ. Otherwise, they would devour me.

When you “judge” someone or something after you’ve handled your own “planks”, you would be amazed how your judgment changes. You would be astounded at how those “other people” suddenly look a lot like you. You would see a beauty and wonder in others that before was simply obscured by prejudices, prejudices that we **all** have and that we must learn to control. But most importantly, when you remove the planks, you will see yourself differently.

Social media has become a great platform for calling out people’s specks. My encouragement to you is that, before you judge, before you conclude...stop.

Use the mirror.

Find your planks...and remove them.

It's not easy to do and it's not fun. But you will be so
happy that you did.

June 14, 2020

Good Sunday morning. As per usual, the first thing I write on Sunday mornings is a message of faith. I hope you are encouraged, believer or not.

Christians often debate whether the first eleven chapters of Genesis are historical, allegorical, or some mixture. But when the twelfth chapter begins, the tone shifts significantly from a 50,000-foot view of global events to a singular focus on one man: Abraham, the claimed father of two modern faith “lineages” - Judaism/Christianity and Islam.

It is here that the archaeological and secular evidence begin to line up with the narrative, so it is very likely that Abraham was a real person of that era and that we are reading an account of his life preserved in

countless oral histories. In a literary sense, he is the first “hero” of the Bible, so it’s really a shame that he was a pretty lousy hero as characters go. In fact, when given the first tough choice in the narrative that we can read in Genesis, he punted it. I want to talk about that choice, because it says a lot about what happens in our world every day.

Abraham lived in Canaan. Of course, Canaan doesn’t exist anymore, but it was probably a region somewhere around modern-day Israel and Jordan, a hop to the northeast from Egypt. In those days, Egypt was an imperial power and regions like Canaan were its property. Egypt’s influence stretched through modern-day Sudan to the south and covered the entire Mediterranean coast to the north, all the way to modern-day Syria. Those lands were conquered

lands, and those people were seen by the Egyptian people as enslaved spoils of war.

So, when a famine gripped Canaan and Abraham's household needed food, it was logical that he would travel to Egypt. When we are in trouble, we seek government assistance, right? In fact, Genesis 12:10 says Abraham actually went to live in Egypt, to work as a servant to feed his family. But there was no guarantee that this strategy would work. The Egyptians had no obligation to let him work, to offer him aid, or anything else. They could have turned him away or even worse, so this was a calculated risk for sure.

Let's not forget, also, that Abraham had just moved to Canaan at God's request not long before. I'm sure he

was thinking, "God, you told me to move here, you told me that I would father great nations, and now we can't even eat? And now you want me to walk into the house of the oppressor and ask for help?"

Wouldn't we all think the same? So he's probably annoyed, maybe angry, and most likely humiliated as he makes the long trip south to Cairo.

When he reaches Egypt, he finally cracks. His wife, Sarai, is also his half-sister. Culturally at the time, this was not uncommon; today, of course, it would be quite unacceptable. But that aside, that fact raised a solution to Abraham's fears about how the Egyptians would treat him and his family. Abraham said to Sarai:

“When the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.” (Gen. 12:12-13).

The father of three faiths lied, and what’s worse, it was a sneaky lie, a half-truth, one that Abraham probably told with a great deal of pride about how he would manage to trick the Egyptians.

Even worse, he lied to save himself at the expense of his own wife/sister. We can also infer from the story that Abraham believed that the Egyptians might claim Sarai for themselves **no matter** what he said.

This says a lot about how the Egyptian ruling class

perceived the Canaanites at that time; whatever they have is ours. Whatever we want, we take. You want Egyptian grain? Here is the price. So Abraham convinced himself that Sarai was to be the “sacrifice” that would save his family, and offered her up. Being a woman in that culture, she had little recourse but to consent.

Yes, that’s how God would do it. Offer one to save all.

I want you to imagine how Abraham felt that day. I’m sure it was something like this:

God had led him into famine.

God had led him into humiliating servitude to the ungodly.

God had led him into possibly losing his beloved wife and maybe even his own life.

God had let the bad guys win.

So Abraham decided he would help God out. He sold out Sarai and got a lot of material wealth for it, enough to solve the immediate famine problem for sure. How about that? One little compromise and everything was better! See, God, **that's** how you do it!

But God isn't mocked. At the end of the chapter, after Pharaoh is punished for Sarai's presence in his harem and the truth comes out, Abraham leaves Egypt, hungry and back to Square One.

As you think about this story, here is a question to ponder: Are you an Egyptian or a Canaanite?

I can see why those who see themselves as Canaanites feel like they do, because I'll wager that most of us would choose that. No one would claim to be the Egyptians, would they? Powerful, superior in their own minds, using others for their own gain; as good as that might sound in some ways, it's garish to most of us. Yet the Egyptians have to exist; that is the duality of this world. So who are they? That's easy. They are "them", not "us". And we want what they have.

Christians, do you ever feel like you're in famine today? Like the world around you is full of "occupiers" who are godless and heathen? Yet this is where we are - we must survive. We must eat. We must live. So, will we do what Abraham did? Will we

compromise, rationalize, “help God out”, and twist truth for these ends, even at the expense of others? Will we strategically “sell out” so that we can get more right now? Abraham tried that approach, and came away with nothing.

So ask yourself today and every day:

Are you doing what God wants, or are you doing what you WISH that God would want?

If that sounds hard, it should; being a Christian isn't easy. God never said it would be. And we all fail. But God promises to pick us up. As Genesis progresses, Abraham lied two more times about his wife, slept with a servant woman, and made some other mistakes even after his lesson in Egypt. God never abandoned him. He won't abandon us.

June 21, 2020

Good Sunday morning. Here is a moment of faith-based reflection, as usual on Sundays.

“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’” (Exodus 32:1)

The behavior of the Israelites during the Exodus is full of what I call “mirror moments”. Those are the moments when you see others behaving and you are struck by (at least) two things. First, you notice how distastefully the behavior in question strikes you, and

next, you notice how uncomfortably often you do it too.

How many sermons have been given on the faithlessness, impatience, and impetuosity of God's people symbolized by the Golden Calf? It is easy to read this story today, look down our noses, and shake our heads in derisive judgment. But before we do that, let's pause for a moment, looking at specific aspects of the story and asking some hard questions every once in a while.

In Exodus 31, God tells Moses that He has given skills to certain people that were to be used for the construction of a place of worship that would house the Ark of the Covenant. God specifically discusses:

“...artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts.”
(Ex. 31:4-5).

The people then used these skills to make an idol in spite of the God that granted them.

Which of God’s gifts are you using for His glory and His Kingdom? Which ones have been used to build idols for your own edification and comfort?

In chapter 32, when the people ask for the idol, Aaron, God’s high priest, doesn’t even hesitate. He orchestrates the construction of the calf and even builds an altar in front of it, saying, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.” (v. 5), knowing full well

that animal was not God and that what he was doing was very wrong in God's eyes.

Which of God's promises have you sold for your own immediate gratification? How often have you led your fellow man into poor choices because you were just too frightened to oppose them?

You see, the Israelites didn't just come up with the idea of the calf that night. The reasons for it had been there for some time. When we finally build the idol, it is easy to suggest because we are all just one step away from doing that, every day. If I could tell you all the times I've torn down idols in my own life, only to turn around later and find that they stand once again. Maybe they have a different form, maybe they have a different look, but they remain, mocking me.

Of course, without question, it is a dangerous thing to point these realities out to your fellow man. Aaron could have stood firm, refused to build the calf, and told the people to be patient and steadfast, but he likely would have been physically attacked and overthrown as a consequence. I wonder if he thought that he was just buying time, fooling them until Moses could come back and save the day.

But this is how idols proliferate. We come to tolerate them and then they simply “blend in” to our faith until we can’t tell which is which. So, when you identify the idols of others, be warned. They may think you are attacking the very core of their faith because they have come to the point where they can no longer tell the difference.

But the saddest verse in this story is actually Exodus 32:9:

"I have seen these people," the Lord said to Moses, 'and they are a stiff-necked people.'"

Stiff-necked? What an odd choice of words. Maybe it's a translation issue? If you look in the original language, both words are there, so it's a literal translation. But let's dig deeper. The word for "stiff" is "qasheh" (man, Hebrew is hard to change to English). By itself, it is often used to mean "hard" or "severe", but combined with the word that follows it in the text, the two most common translations are "obstinate" and "churlish". These two words in

English describe a rebellious attitude that is rude, cruel, and stubborn.

Let that sink in for a moment. God was saying to Moses that His people were rudely and cruelly rejecting Him and His gift of freedom from Egypt. He looked at them and instead of seeing thankfulness, He saw stubborn anger, like a child that gets what he asked for and then complains about it. Have you ever spent so much time on a gift for someone and then that person finds fault with it or just tosses it aside? Think about that feeling for a moment....

The people of Israel deeply hurt God.

Our idols don't just make us feel better right now. They hurt God.

Our idols don't advance the Kingdom or point to God. They hurt God.

Our idols don't make church better or make the world better. They hurt God.

Today, in a quiet moment, have the courage to ask yourself where your idols are. What makes you look elsewhere instead of to God? When do you use God's gifts for yourself? How have you compromised God for what makes you feel better now?

Identify them. Line them up. Try to get rid of at least one today. Then try again tomorrow. Don't be discouraged if they come back - they've been there a long time. Just keep at it. But when you start to fatigue, remember how it feels to imagine hurting God's feelings.

June 28, 2020

Good Sunday morning. As we wake up to incessant news about viral growth, pain, and suffering, it is easy to ask what we did to deserve this. We slip into simplistic “A causes B” mindsets and try to find THE reason why all of this is happening. Humans are averse to the unexplained. We have an impulse to know why. It is not a sinful or evil impulse in the least, but it can separate us from God if we don’t manage it.

In the most well-known scene in Jesus’ life, tortured on one of the cruelest devices mankind has ever constructed, Jesus also asked the question in a famous moment.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

But did you know he borrowed the language? King David asked the same question in Psalms 22:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?” (Ps. 22:1)

I thought today that I would “transform” the whole of Psalms 22:1-18 into more modern language, in order to make a point that is relevant for our current situation.

“God! I know you’re listening! You’ve listened before, and you’ve listened to others! I know you can hear me!”

“Why won’t you answer?”

“You are God! I know you can fix this!
You have always been there for us! Look
at what is happening! Look at all of this
mess!”

“Why won’t you answer?”

“It’s me, isn’t it? I’m unworthy. I must
have done something terrible, and this
is my punishment. Everyone laughs at
me and tells me I’m getting what I
deserve for believing in you. ‘Let God
save him!’ they say derisively, and then
ask ‘Where is your God now?’”

“Why won’t you answer?”

“But I remember how you’ve cared for me. I remember how you have been there since even before I was born. If you aren’t here, then there is no one left to help.”

“Why won’t you answer?”

“The enemy surrounds me, can’t you see that? The angry bulls, the hungry lions! They wait, watching me with desire, savoring every drop of my fear. They know I cannot resist them – they know they have won. I am crushed,

hopeless, and defeated. All I can do is
wait to die. Doesn't that matter to you?"

"Why won't you answer?"

"They have wounded me for pleasure.
They have treated me as less than
human. All that I have, they can take at
will, and I am powerless to stop them."

"WHY won't you answer?"

Do you feel that way today? Surrounded by a
spreading virus, racial tensions, vicious and violent
ideologies, stories of pain, suffering, and death? Is
your heart like wax? Do you feel melted and broken?

Do you wonder why God is so angry at us, even though we didn't do anything to deserve this?

Now you have an inkling of how Jesus felt.

God allowed the unbridled evil of the world to slaughter His own Son though Christ had done nothing to deserve it. And within all the myriad theological reasons for that, there is one important lesson for today. Because, as we continue to read Psalm 22, we see that David finally realized that his vision was too narrow. He realized that the pain and suffering was deceiving him into only looking at the "now". Even Christ, who knew **full well** that His momentary suffering would blossom into a new and glorious Kingdom, even Christ, in his humanness, for a moment, lost sight of that in the Garden.

But then we read Psalms 22:19-31, where we see that God has not despised us but has listened, not with temporary fixes like taking a virus away or making people be nice to each other, but with a permanent, eternal fix. We wanted to feel better and be safer in this moment, and God said:

“I have something better! But only your suffering will allow you to see that.”

It may not be pleasant to hear, but Christianity without suffering is just a bunch of axioms.

Christianity without death is just a bunch of nice ideas.

Christianity without the horrific things that happened to a man that in no way deserved them but overcame them anyway is just another psychological opiate.

Have you been cultivating the fruits of the Spirit in your life? When it is time to harvest, what are you finding? Vast fields of patience, long-suffering, gentleness, kindness, and self-control? Or are you finding fields of withered, starved, and neglected fruit? Whose fault would that be?

Bad things happen in this world. To everyone. All the time. That is what this reality has to offer. We are certainly not less deserving on them than Christ was, and they happened to Him. So as you endure, remember Psalms 22. Remember that Jesus Himself felt what you feel. Remember that there is only one

outcome that is eternal, and if you are a believer, that outcome is sealed and assured. And if you've been neglecting your "spiritual fruit" garden, now's a great time to get back to it.

July 5, 2020

Good Sunday morning. It is a weekend where Americans consider our nation in so many ways – some positive, some not. Some 240 years ago this country was born, and in that short time its legacy is already rigidly cemented into the annals of world history. It has become the most dominant geopolitical power of the age, almost imperial in its scope and influence. There is hardly an area of the world that it does not reach in some way. Our prayer should be that, when it does reach, it always does so with goodwill and self-sacrifice, no matter what the situation is or why it is. But if we forget that, we can look to Genesis 9 for a reminder.

Genesis 9 is the “flood aftermath” chapter. The water is gone and life begins anew. Beginning with verse 20,

we read that Noah had a little too much wine. He is described as sleeping in his tent, “uncovered.” Must have been quite a night.

Now, nakedness was shameful then like it is now; we learned that in the story of Adam and Eve. Even though Noah was probably unaware of what was happening, and even though one could argue that he did this to himself, this was still a problem that required remediation.

Enter his three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. I could spend quite a while on the etymological significance of those names, but today I want to focus on nations. According to Hebrew scholars, Japheth is the root of many ancient and modern nations of southern and far eastern Europe. Ham is considered to be the root of

many North African nations (including Egypt) and some Arabic nations, including ancient Canaan, which was under Egyptian control in Genesis until the Exodus. Shem, however, is considered to be the root of the Hebrew nation. His name is actually written into the name of the Hebrew languages and culture – S(h)emitic.

With that context, back to the story.

Ham enters Noah's tent and sees that he is naked and in need of "coverage". But rather than take the responsibility, Ham wanders out of the cave and tells his brothers about the situation. Upon hearing the news, Shem and Japheth act differently. They cooperate to cover their father. They do so without any expectation of reward. All Noah would realize

when he awoke is that he was covered and would probably not remember being naked. But the next morning, Noah learns about what happened. He curses Ham and tells him that Ham's people will, in the end, serve the people of Shem and Japheth.

Sometimes the Bible is like an inkblot test. It tells us more about who we are than about the characters themselves. This is a good example of that. Some will read this story and think that Ham became cursed because of what he **said** to his brothers. They might imagine that he ridiculed his father, slandered him, or disrespected him ("Look at that old fool in there!") That is not in the narrative, though. It simply says that he "told his two brothers outside." (v. 22). But if that is what we see in the story, then the lesson we are likely to learn is that we shouldn't slander people or

make fun of them. A good lesson, to be sure, but too narrow a vision.

Ham was cursed because of his **actions**. Ham encountered a situation that he could have remedied, but instead of putting himself aside and doing what needed to be done, he selfishly passed that task on to others, thinking, "It's not my problem." Ham had the opportunity to help his father; he just didn't care enough to do so.

He was too self-centered to be inconvenienced.

We see people all around us today, in the midst of suffering and pain, none of which is their fault personally, and so many of us are simply walking away. There are opportunities to help, to support, to

contribute to the greater good, and we step outside the cave and tell someone else. We turn the needs of others into spectacles to be observed, shaking our heads and chastising them, wondering when someone will come along and clean it all up. We behave like Ham, who acted like he cared, but truthfully couldn't be bothered.

We will never know exactly what Ham was thinking. Maybe he disapproved of drunkenness, maybe he and his father were fighting, or maybe he was just an avoidant personality. Whatever the case, because he chose not to serve others, he became an unwilling servant.

Which brother have you been recently? Have you been Ham, Shem, or Japheth, when God puts

something in front of you and asks you, "What will you do?" What has been most important to you - your own convenience and comfort, or the needs of others?

The answer is between you and God. No one can sit in judgment of you because we are all like Ham sometimes. But next time you have one of those "look hard in the mirror" moments, I pray that you have the courage to honestly ask yourself that question, and give God the opportunity to make you more like Him.

July 12, 2020

Good Sunday morning. As per usual, a post on faith, for believers and non-believers alike. If you are a believer, be forewarned. I may sound a little blasphemous at first to make a point.

If you are a Christian, have you ever stepped back and looked at the ministry of Christ with a broad lens? Here are some interesting things you will see.

- 1) Only 1/10 of His life was spent in ministry. Most of His years here were unremarkable relatively speaking.
- 2) When His ministry began, it began with a miraculous event (water to wine), an event that He really didn't even want to do. More on that later.

- 3) Later, large crowds followed Him everywhere, and those descriptions are almost always tethered to statements about how He would do miraculous things among them, like healing.
- 4) The end of His mortal life was punctuated by the most astonishing event ever recorded, the Resurrection.

Now, non-believers will either say none of those things happened or that Jesus isn't even real, but humor me for a moment. Let's say they did happen. Thus, the picture that some might construct of Jesus would be a man wandering around the Middle East trading miracles for an audience. One could easily argue that He was healing and casting out spirits and the like just to secure an audience for His words. In that scenario, all those people weren't really there to

hear what He had to say and what He did say wasn't really important. They were all there just to see what they could get from Him. Note that this impression has nothing to do with whether Jesus was really who He said He was, but everything to do with whom was following Him and trying to explain who He was.

OK, blasphemy over, because there are lessons to be learned for today, as upsetting as that might have been to read for some.

This kind of mentality is exactly what we see today amidst the pandemic. We are a society of anxiety, a collective of uncertainty. We are now to the point where almost everyone reading this is separated from someone by some degree that has been personally

affected by this virus. As my wife once said, "It can feel like the walls are closing in."

Humans are predictable creatures when anxiety and uncertainty become really salient. They cling to whatever unassailable beliefs they hold. So you read about people saying that the virus is God's punishment, having dreams about future apocalypse, and claiming the Rapture is nigh. So you hear about people rabidly defending a country out of the belief that if we just make America "Christian", all these negative things will just go away. So you are bombarded by all manner of scapegoating, straw men, false premises, ridiculous logic, and closed minds, all expressed in tones that seem to be calm, rational, and clear-headed. If I had a dollar for every

person I've heard say, "I don't know what to believe",
I could pay off my house.

The Israelites of Jesus' day know your pain. Let's
imagine what some of the conversations about Jesus
might have been like.

"I've heard many false teachers before.
I've heard the promises of freedom from
the Romans. I've heard them promise
that God would deliver us. So many
liars. And now here is the next one -
some Nazarene carpenter who thinks
He knows it all, telling us that
everything is about to get turned upside
down around here."

"Why should I believe Him? But He heals people. He does things that I know shouldn't happen. I know those people were sick, and now they aren't. That's weird. But I've been burned so many times. What if these are all tricks? What if this is just another lie?"

"I don't know what to believe anymore."

Sound familiar? Jesus knew that His words and His promises were being offered to anxious, frustrated, angry people in geopolitical bondage, second-class humans that the Romans regarded as pests. It seemed to them like they were always the pests, the rejected, and the enslaved. They had watched their nation crumble before their eyes more than once at the hands

of invaders, false gods, and poor rulers, even to the point of civil war. Jesus knew He needed to show them, not just tell them, so He used compassion.

Remember the first miracle I mentioned, regarding the wine at the wedding? He was so adamant that He should not help, so why did He finally relent? I suggest that He did so because of compassion.

Compassion is not sympathy. Compassion is love in action. He didn't just feel bad that the party was out of wine. He hurt **with** that host and acted out His love, **knowing full well** that one act would change the course of His life on earth forever.

In a sense, He sacrificed Himself long before the cross. He did it at Cana, too.

Jesus did miracles because the people **needed** them, not for His own glorification. He knew that His ministry would look to the skeptic as just another dog-and-pony show, but His compassion for His fellow man won the day, and miracles were the best way to quickly demonstrate who He was. But sometimes I do wonder how much it hurt to know that His compassion was being treated by so many as "free stuff," and that so many tolerated His words just to get to the possibility of a personal payoff.

There are many false teachers today. They look honest. They sound honest. But they are just using us. With clever words and subtle tricks, they take our eyes from the Word and ask us to look at them. They want to be the ones you turn to in your time of anxiety for their benefit, not for yours. Don't believe

anything I say or anyone else because we said it, but only if what we say is consistent with the words of God.

Christianity is not a fair trade agreement with God to get what you want. It is surrender to a God greater than yourself whom has already given you all you need. All you have to do is accept it.

July 19, 2020

Good morning folks. It is Sunday and I'd like to share a faith-based message. I hope believers and non-believers alike can find something in it.

Luke 15 is an interesting chapter. It starts with the Pharisees, the Biblical "smartest men in the room", finding fault with Jesus because He associated with "known sinners". Suffice it to say that, in the minds of the Pharisees, this proved beyond doubt that Jesus was not the Messiah.

So Jesus responded with three parables. What I really enjoy about His parables is that they often do two things at once. They reveal the inadequacy of the old way of thinking about the Kingdom while at the same time glorify the new way of thinking about it. None of

His parables ever actually claimed that the Old Law was wrong, just that He was offering something better, a transformation of the old law into something different.

Two of the parables he told in this chapter are fairly well-known. He began with the story of the shepherd leaving the 99 sheep to find the one that was lost, and He ended with the Prodigal Son. But sandwiched in between those two stories is one that is often forgotten. It is the story of the woman's coin.

I like to think that Jesus told multiple stories to make the same point because He knew what the "smartest men in the room" would be thinking. For instance, at the end of the story of the lost sheep, the Pharisees probably thought (and may have even said aloud),

"But the 99 sheep you left are now without protection
- the predators will destroy them."

Ha! Got you now, Jesus.

Jesus would then patiently sigh and say, "Ok, how about this? A woman has 10 coins (drachma). She loses one (we will focus on that word "lose" in a moment). She turns the house upside-down until she finds it, and then when she does, she calls all the household and even the neighbors for a celebration."

I imagine that the Pharisees at this point were confused. Why would anyone do that? It's just a coin. She still has nine others. Yes, it is a shame, but was that one coin worth all that effort? That doesn't seem like rational behavior.

Ha! Got you now, Pharisees.

Not that the other two stories are inadequate, but I believe that the parable of the coin offers three things to the discussion that the other do not.

First, coins aren't alive. With sheep and people, it would be expected that the listener would have a visceral, emotional reaction to the situation because they are living creatures. A coin is, well, a coin.

Second, it exposed what the Pharisees truly believed about "sinners" and other undesirables. They had no value. As long as those people fell in line according to the Law, they were accepted. As long as they were following the rules, all was well. But those rebels,

those sinners, those non-Jews...why should anyone care about them? Cast them out before they ruin us all. The Pharisees didn't understand the woman's behavior regarding the coin because they didn't understand why a "lost coin" should receive any concern at all. It deserved only scorn and separation for being lost in the first place, and they certainly didn't understand how someone claiming to be a rabbi would claim that such behavior was the right choice.

But the third reason really hits me hard. Translations sometimes lose impact because of differences in the languages. Jesus uses a specific Greek word in this parable: *ἀπόλλυμι* (*apollumi*). It is often translated "lose" or "lost" in English. Jesus uses the word in all three of these parables and also in several other of his

speeches. It is composed of two words: *ἀπό* (*apo*, meaning "away from") and *ἄλλομι* (*ollumi*, meaning "to fully destroy", "to cut off entirely"). The coin wasn't just lost - it was **LOST**. Look at the words in bold below, other places where this Greek word is used.

*"If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to **LOSE** one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."*

(Mt. 5:29)

*"Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins **WILL BE RUINED**. No, they pour new*

wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved." (Mt. 9:17)

*"In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should **PERISH**." (Mt. 18:14)*

*"They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon and in Greek is **APOLLYON** (that is, Destroyer)." (Rev. 9:11)*

Jesus was saying not that the sheep, the coin, or the son were just "missing". He was saying that they were **DOOMED**. He was saying that the Destroyer had claimed them.

Do the parables sound different now?

When we tell others about our faith, is it, "Get with the program or get out"? Is it, "How can you be so blind?" Is it, "Be like us or we don't have time for you"? Even if that's not exactly what we say, is that what people hear? Or do we even try to find them at all, content to simply wave our hand disparagingly and say, "it's just one coin"?

When we share our faith, is it because that person has such immense and incalculable value to the Kingdom and to God that they deserve every ounce of effort we can muster, not because of what they've done or not done, but because they are just valuable, period?

Is our faith more about preserving what we have than
it is about sharing it?

If so, then a lot of sheep will never find their way
home.

July 26, 2020

Good morning. As usual on Sundays, I want to share a word of faith with all who care to read it.

This week, my church made the difficult decision to cancel our youth production tour of Godspell completely this year. As a member of the supporting musical crew, the annual regional performance tour is such a blessing to so many kids and adults and has been for almost 25 years. Each tour is a special memory for the seniors that participate, so it is upsetting that this year those memories was not allowed to occur. In honor of Godspell (which is based in Matthew), I want to focus on a passage from Matthew 24.

The chaos around us is growing. There are voices from all directions claiming to know "truth", claiming to have the answers, claiming to be "the way." They come from those antagonistic to the Gospel and those claiming to represent it. It is becoming more difficult daily to be sure which voices are speaking truth. We read:

*"Jesus answered: 'Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many. You will hear of **WARS** and rumors of **WARS**, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. **NATION** will rise against **NATION**, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and*

*earthquakes in various places. All these are
the beginning of **BIRTH PAINS**."*

(Matthew 24: 4-8)

A lot of "prophecy books" and sermons have been written on this passage. The majority of them rant profusely about such things as socialism, Israel, the Anti-Christ, Islam and sharia law, World War III, the China menace, and such. This is rooted in the interpretation of the phrase "end times".

Indeed, in Matthew 24, Jesus is telling the disciples what the "end times" will look like, but He is doing that because the disciples asked a question specifically in response to Jesus' claim in Matthew 24:2 that in "those days", the Temple would be obliterated (I don't believe He was referencing the

actual building, but that is for another essay). The disciples thought He was talking about the building, though, and they wanted to be ready for something so catastrophic. So Jesus gave them an answer that probably sounded quite cryptic to them, just like it does to us to many of us today. So let's focus on the words I've capitalized and ask this question.

Was Jesus talking about the apocalyptic, futuristic prophecies we hear loudly proclaimed today? I am convinced that He was not. Let's take each bold-type word above, one by one, and examine it.

"WARS": It's no surprise that so many have framed this passage in terms of violence and destruction because of this word. That's what WAR means in English, after all. The Greek word is πόλεμος (*polemos*),

and it is often translated in English as "war." But it has a secondary meaning as well. It was used in Greek to mean "quarrel or dispute". We get the English word "polemic" from it. According to Webster, a polemic is "a strong verbal and/or written attack against something," and I believe Jesus was talking about this definition of the word. First, we have to realize that the "end times" began on Jesus' ascension, not when Israel became a nation or any other such modern "prophetic" markers. Jesus was telling the disciples that as soon as He left, the voices would start. The deceptions would grow. The "polemics" would be written. This isn't about modern warfare or nuclear annihilation. It's about voices, voices that can destroy faith even more profoundly than bombs.

"NATION": The Greek word is *ἔθνος* (*ethnos*). We get words like "ethnography" and "ethnocentrism" from it. It literally means "race" or "tribe." I find it hard to believe that Jesus had any interest in the modern definition of "nation", defined as an arbitrary man-made boundary that separates lands so that we can label them differently on a map. Nothing He said anywhere in the Gospels suggests that. He didn't care how many "lines in the sand" people would draw, saying, "This is mine and that is yours." But He did know that His people, the Kingdom of God current, present, and eternal, no matter what country from which they came, would be assailed by the other "tribes" out there. He knew why the polemics would be written. He knew that many would try to discredit, corrode, and corrupt the eternal, unseen Kingdom through words, not with guns. Wouldn't it be strange

to use our modern definition of the word "nation" with a group of listeners that at the time didn't even have one?

"BIRTH PANGS": This is a rarely-used word, *ὀδίνω* (*odino*). It is used four times in this form but written as different English words depending on the translation: "sorrows", "travails", and "agony" are common. Why would Jesus use this word? Birth of what? I think that question misses the point. Imagine being a pregnant woman (men, try your best on this one). You have hosted your baby and now it is time for it to emerge. This is the quintessential "point of no return", isn't it? Like it or not, the uterus will contract and the body will force the child through the birth canal. It is not up for discussion. In a way, the woman is "trapped by agony", isn't she? She is "imprisoned by sorrow". The

pain is inescapable and intense. It only subsides when the baby is born, and then, almost magically, all the pain and tears were worth it.

I suggest that this is what Jesus ultimately meant. The polemics, the strife, the cacophony of voices, and the ongoing war against the Kingdom is not escapable today just as it wasn't in the first century. As Christians, we literally **asked** for it. But in the agony and the sorrow, in those moments where we feel like we are "trapped" by death and pain, we have something that is worth all that pain.

Salvation. Truth. Hope. A new heaven and a new earth.

This is the message of Godspell and the message of Jesus. It doesn't require fancy words, political power, or worldly wealth, and it doesn't come without cost. Your witness to the world is how you willingly, gladly, and diligently show every day that you are willing to pay that cost, assured that what you have received in return is worth it.

August 2, 2020

Good morning. Since it is Sunday, I am sharing a message of faith first of all. I hope it speaks to everyone who reads it.

My job requires me to talk. Mostly that means talking to rooms full of students, but occasionally it means talking to rooms full of other colleagues. One event in particular years ago placed me in front of about 300 CEOs and CFOs from a particular industry. As petrifying as that might sound to many of you, I've always been comfortable in those situations; always a little on edge and anxious to do well, but never unable to do the task. That's why I was surprised with myself two years ago when I was asked to teach junior high and high school kids in Sunday School.

We were starting a run through the Bible, beginning in Genesis, and it was Week One. Now I should have been supremely confident. I have spent years studying the creation story and reconciling it with scientific data, and I teach for a living. The first three chapters of Genesis were a big part of my youthful wandering through faith, agnosticism, and doubt. So many say separation from God is liberating but I found it painful (thought I wouldn't admit it at the time). Bombarded by arguments from both sides, I was not yet mature enough to process them and determine where the truth was. While on the surface those years were enjoyable, underneath, I was torn.

So when I had the chance to teach these kids, including my own daughter, on the realities of God as shown through Genesis, I wanted to somehow just

inject everything I had learned into their brains. I wanted to spare them all the struggles I had undertaken, all the pain and doubt I'd felt, and give them my hard-won confidence in God. After all, they were all my brothers and sisters in Him, precious young men and women, so why wouldn't I want to do that? Under this self-imposed pressure, I was much more nervous than I've ever been in that kind of situation. By the end of the first class, I had poignantly realized that I can't save them from those things, and even if I could, it would harm them, not help them.

Matthew 5 is well-known for the Beatitudes, but the latter part of the chapter to me is just as strong. It concludes with verses 45-48:

"He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5: 45-48)

There are two things in this passage that remind me of my error in that class. The first sentence is the first of those. So many of us define "love" by outcomes. If you "loved" me, you would have saved me this heartache! If you "loved" me, you would have stopped this pain! If you "loved" me, then my life

would be better! That's what I was trying to do in this class with these kids. I was trying to show them my love for them by making "future pain" go away if they would just accept what I told them, whether they wanted that or not. But Jesus reminds us here that God's love for us is not defined by outcomes; instead, it exists in spite of them. He reminds us that His love is not reserved for believers, but it is only the believer that can truly understand it. That's what I should have communicated. I should have said that it didn't matter what voices would try to destroy their faith as they walked life's paths. As long as they remembered that God's love for them never ceases, even in the midst of that pain and confusion, they would persevere.

The second key in this passage is at the end: the word "perfect." The Greek word is *τέλος* (*telos*), a word that personally sends my mind in a million different directions, most of them having nothing to do with this essay. I don't want to get too deep here, but one argument for God in philosophy is the **teleological argument**. It states that God must exist because the order and completeness of the universe demands that He does (if you are a non-believer reading this, retract your claws please; I'm not going to debate that argument here. I'm just using it as an example of the word). So the word translated "perfect" here is also translated "complete". That, to me, is very important.

For years when I read this verse, I thought, "Well, that rules me out." In my mind, "perfect" meant error-free, and often in English it is used that way. It is

something that is always positive and always correct, without blemish. So, thanks, Jesus, for telling me to be something that I can't be, right? But, oh, the dangers of extracting sentences from soliloquies.

You see, verse 48 is the culmination of an idea that Jesus introduced earlier in His speech, first saying:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (v. 17).

Then, a little later, He says:

"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will

certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

(v. 20)

Between this point and verse 48, Jesus then tells us what He means by "perfect", which the reader misses if that verse is extracted from the entire narrative. He means that we are perfected, completed, and a finished end product, not in what we do, but in who we are. We are "perfected" in the same way as Jesus was perfecting God's law, where "heart, soul, and mind" are the source of our actions, not the other way around. He meant that in perfection God's choices are our choices, God's vision is our vision, and God's purpose is our purpose. Only if that is true can we possibly hope to do the things that Jesus describes in verses 21-48, things that are **evidence** of that perfection. His admonitions to us in this passage are

not instructions **for** perfection, they are things we can do **because** of that perfection. Yes, our own vision, purpose, and desire will try to intervene. It did for me in that class and it will for all of us. But that is how they will come to their own understanding, their own knowledge, and their own certainty that their perfection and their hope is in Him, and that pain can do **nothing** to change that.

There's a lot of rain falling today in this world. No one is exempt, no matter your beliefs. You have a choice in this: God's vision or yours. As that Sunday School class progressed over the year, I learned how to get myself out of the way and let God speak. I learned that His vision is better than mine. I learned to trust in the "completeness" that He gave me, whether I felt complete or not.

August 9, 2020

Hello again on this Sunday morning. I'd like to share a message of faith with all of you.

I suspect most of us by now have felt it. After a discussion last night [about the virus pandemic], a friend of mine said, "There is just so much crap out there." Everywhere we look, powerful voices are competing for us to endorse their version of truth. It is a common occurrence when there is uncertainty. With the onset of schools opening this fall, the triumvirate of fear, doubt, and anger are at a fever pitch.

Everyone with an electronic megaphone is vying for our loyalties, trying to convince us that they are the only guides out of the storm.

But our endorsement of their vision is not free of charge. The seeds of fear and anger must be paid for, and their fruit demands further compensation.

Followers imitate leaders, and the more they do, the less aware they become of where the leader is actually taking them. So believers are instructed to be vigilant, critical of ideas, and watchful for tricks and

deceptions. I wish I saw more of that today. Many of those leading others have become blissfully ignorant of their responsibilities to those who are following.

They are more concerned with being heard than being right, more concerned with persuasion than guidance, and more enamored with power than with peace.

My musings on this brought me to the 55th Psalm.

King David found himself surrounded by those who would harm him, most notably a son who was

conspiring against him. Absalom would work against David to manipulate the people for his own glory, portraying himself as a leader while guiding them down a path of ruin. Paths of ruin, of course, inevitably end in death.

When I consider this psalm, I see a lot of what is happening around us today. Put yourself in David's position as you read it. We may not be kings like he was, but we all have people in our lives that want to gain our loyalty, win our favor, and convince us that they will lead us by dangling our values before us like carrots on a stick. The Biblical commentator Matthew Henry says it this way:

"See how David was weary of the treachery and ingratitude of men, and the cares and disappointments of his

high station: he longed to hide himself
in some desert from the fury and
fickleness of his people. He aimed not at
victory, but rest; a barren wilderness, so
that he might be quiet. The wisest and
best of men most earnestly covet peace
and quietness, and the more when
vexed and wearied with noise and
clamour."

So below, in its entirety, is Psalm 55. I hope it is a
blessing to you as you read.

*"Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore
my plea; hear me and answer me.*

"My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught because of what my enemy is saying, because of the threats of the wicked; for they bring down suffering on me and assail me in their anger. My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen on me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.

"I said, 'Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. I would flee far away and stay in the desert; I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm.'

"Lord, confuse the wicked, confound their words, for I see violence and strife in the

city. Day and night they prowl about on its walls; malice and abuse are within it.

Destructive forces are at work in the city; threats and lies never leave its streets.

"If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were rising against me, I could hide. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship at the house of God, as we walked about among the worshipers.

"Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the realm of the dead, for evil finds lodging among them.

"As for me, I call to God, and the Lord saves me. Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice. He rescues me unharmed from the battle waged against me, even though many oppose me. God, who is enthroned from of old, who does not change – he will hear them and humble them, because they have no fear of God.

"My companion attacks his friends; he violates his covenant. His talk is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart; his words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords.

"Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous

*be shaken. But you, God, will bring down
the wicked into the pit of decay; the
bloodthirsty and deceitful will not live out
half their days.*

"But as for me, I trust in you."

August 16, 2020

Good Sunday. I'd like to share a word with you, as I always do on Sundays, that isn't about a virus.

Dateline, 1st century. The church in the Near East is very young and very confused. Jesus has ascended and He has left His apostles to watch the house. In Acts 2, the text describes a wind that blows through the meeting area of the remnant (those that still believed in Jesus at that time). Peter and John were there, and they no doubt recognized what had happened while the rest of the group seemed very confused. This, of course, is the passage often used to argue that speaking in tongues is a current and real spiritual gift, but I'm not focused on that debate at this time. Instead, I want to consider Peter's

explanation to the crowd of what happened and his use of the prophet Joel.

In Acts 2, beginning in verse 14, Peter says:

“Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

*Your sons and daughters will
prophesy, your young men
will see visions, your old men
will dream dreams.*

*Even on my servants, both
men and women, I will pour
out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.*

*I will show wonders in the
heavens above and signs on
the earth below, blood and
fire and billows of smoke.*

*The sun will be turned to
darkness and the moon to*

*blood before the coming of the
great and glorious day of the
Lord.*

*And everyone who calls on
the name of the Lord will be
saved.'" (from Joel 2:28-32)*

Let's focus on something often missed at this point – these are Jews in the room. That is very important. People always focus on the language part of this event. Did people actually speak in other languages that they didn't know? Was the effect on the hearer, where the Spirit acted as an intermediary translator so that all present heard their own language? We will never really know, to be honest, but it really doesn't matter. The point of these events (another occurs in

Acts 10) is what they symbolized, not the actual miracle itself.

And the symbolism of this moment is deeply profound. The Jews in the room had, in a momentary flash of time, watched God open their faith, their birthright, to the Gentiles. Those in the room didn't claim to be hearing their own language, they claim to be hearing these people **proclaiming the wonders of God** in their own language. Non-Jews, Arabs, Greeks, speaking truths that only rabbis should know! It must have been a massive shock, so it is easy to see how they would just rationalize it away as "drunk talk."

But Peter admonishes them and begins to explain how this was a fulfillment of God's promise, proclaimed in the words of Christ, to make

membership in the Kingdom based only on belief in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and not on ethnicity, heritage, or tribe. To further show how critical this moment was for the early church, let me take the first part of Joel's prophecy and write it in modern "expanded" language, as spoken as God:

"After all of the struggle and pain that My people have endured at the hands of others, after My Son has come and completed His mission, in those days, I will make Myself available to all people on the earth, because the Kingdom is now open to all. I will enter into personal relationship with all people, because the curtain is torn and all of My people are My priests. Men and women of all nations and races will be given direct

access to knowledge of Me, relationship with Me, and discernment of Me so that they can tell all who would listen of the Truth and warn all who would listen of the lies of the Evil One. This is not something reserved for the high priests anymore; those who are Mine are ALL My witnesses and I am in communion with ALL of you. And I mean everyone! Slaves, servants, handmaidens, social status and station – none of that matters any longer. The old way of doing things is gone.”

As hopeful and wonderful as that message is, I fear that today what many don't see in it is the immense responsibility that it carries. When we give our kids gifts like phones or cars, we learn quickly how much

they really understand the gravity of the responsibility that those gifts carry. Too often in today's world, Christians are more than happy to accept God's gift, but then either let it sit on the shelf or misuse it in awful ways.

As a result, they become vulnerable to deception. Because they are no longer connected to Christ in a meaningful way, they can no longer clearly see the lies in the world. It's like they got a new device, but never really learned how to use it so it never reaches its full potential. There are so many churches today in a state of utter confusion and chaos at the deepest levels because they have not accepted the responsibility of Acts 2 along with the promise.

If you've disconnected from God, or if you have simply accepted His promise and then not given it a second thought, then it's no wonder that the Gospel just sounds like "drunk talk" to you now. That can change. It has to.

September 6, 2020

Good morning. It's the first Sunday in September already; wow. This one is long, so I'm sorry. There is a lot to say.

I felt led to look at a specific verse today because I think I've seen it quoted recently in some form or fashion hundreds of times. It is one of those verses that is easy to pluck from Paul's letter to Timothy and apply to a wide variety of situations. Of course, when we do that, we often make it say something that Paul never intended to say. The verse is 2 Timothy 1:7, written below in different translations:

*"For God has not given us the spirit of fear;
but of power, and of love, and of a sound
mind." (American KJV)*

"For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline." (NIV)

"For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline." (NAS)

When I was younger, there was a T-shirt slogan that was popular: "NO FEAR." It ended up on hats, bumper stickers, and everything else. It became a bit of a mantra for some young people especially, signifying their (self-proclaimed) lifestyle of overcoming fear and doing risky things. It was a badge of honor for those who took the message seriously. Today, Christians seem to have adopted a

variant of that slogan as their own, proudly shouting "Faith Over Fear!" and other similar things. But let's stop for a moment and think about Paul's words more deeply.

This letter to Timothy was written during Paul's imprisonment in Rome after the city burned in AD 64. Nero, the Roman emperor at the time, rounded up the Christians and blamed them for the fires. The fires were bad - about 70% of Rome was gutted, including the emperor's palace. But why did he blame the Christians?

Nero needed a scapegoat for the blaze because the people were starting conspiracy theories (imagine that!). The Romans knew that Nero didn't like the way Rome was built, and he had talked before the fire

about tearing parts of it down and rebuilding it like he wanted it to be. Contrary to popular belief, Nero did not “fiddle while Rome burned”. He actually opened his home to displaced citizens during the fire even though his own palace was eventually destroyed. Still, despite the fact that there was no evidence at all, the people started to believe that Nero had ordered the fires to be set to carry out his grand plan of rebuilding the city. Thus, he did what any autocrat would do when faced with unreasonable conspiracies that have become true *prima facie*. He found a vulnerable population that no one really liked to pin it on. The people loved this, identifying Paul as the "ringleader" and cheering as the Roman government swept through the city, capturing Christians and jailing them.

Timothy was Paul's best friend. From a distance, word of Paul's imprisonment got back to him, and I'm sure that he was distraught as he watched the believers in the city be railroaded and falsely accused by the government. He probably believed that Paul would be executed. I suspect that Paul realized how devastated Timothy would be about these events, so he penned this letter. He starts by telling Timothy that his conscience was pure, that he had done nothing wrong, and that he remained confident in his faith and in God.

Then, very importantly, he acknowledges Timothy's sadness but doesn't scold him for it. He doesn't tell him "Faith Over Fear" or "suck it up" or "God's got this" or "This is God's plan". He simply empathizes with Timothy's sadness and then places his mind in

the proper frame, reminding him that nothing in this world can change the eternal promise that God has given to us, embodied in the Holy Spirit. Paul invokes memories of role models in Timothy's family that exemplified Spirit-filled living, encourages him to trust that God has granted him the same Spirit, and instructs him to allow that Spirit to be "stirred up." In empathizing with Timothy's fear and sadness, he sets the stage to remind him that God's promises transcend all of those feelings without making him feel small for feeling them.

So as we arrive at the famous verse 7, Paul had just encouraged Timothy to let the Spirit guide his thoughts and actions towards eternal matters, not worldly ones.

When we honestly look around the Christian world today, is that what we see? Is that what YOU mean when you say "faith over fear"?

But let's continue. Verse 7 has three words that are critical: *δειλιάς* (*deilias*), *σωφρονισμοῦ* (*sophronismou*), and *ἀγάπης* (*agapes*; yes, it is plural here). The first two words are only used in this verse; they appear nowhere else in the Bible.

A few of you might wonder about another Greek word, "*phobos*", which we highlighted earlier in another essay. Some of you may correctly note that "*phobos*" means "fear" and is the root of many fear-based words in English (i.e., "phobias"). Why did Paul use "*deilias*" instead of "*phobos*"? Because he wasn't talking about fear, terror, or dread; he was talking

about courage. "*Deilias*" is best translated as "timidity" or "cowardice", a state of giving up hope because the challenge ahead seems insurmountable. It has nothing to do with pretending like you're aren't scared. It has nothing to do with denying that you feel fear out of some sort of misplaced piety or false strength. It has nothing to do with paralyzing terror. It is acting in spite of your emotions, managing them rather than being ruled by them. It is watching how Christians in Rome were being collected and murdered and still knowing that the truth of God is greater than all of it.

How many Christians today think that Paul meant we are supposed to fearlessly storm the gates of society to reclaim the world? What if he meant instead that every Christian has a choice, every day, to focus on

the threats of the world OR the assurances of God?

Focusing on one of them reduces the other to irrelevance.

What about "*agapes*"? Why is it plural? Because Paul is reminding Timothy to connect with others in the body of Christ. "*Agapes*" referenced what we loosely translate as "love-feasts" (I know, strange name).

These were feasts among believers that generally preceded the Lord's Supper and were characterized by displays of unconditional unity. Social class, wealth disparity, and other things we use to differentiate each other and distribute resources were ignored. The wealthy fed the poor, the advantaged fed the disadvantaged. The church simply came together as one. Paul is telling Timothy that he can't do this alone.

How many Christians have not only decided to fearlessly storm the gates of the world to prove how they are not afraid, but have also decided that it is their sole burden to bear? How isolated have we become from each other in our churches? The more separated we are, the more indication that we are listening to the threats of the world rather than the Spirit.

Finally, the word "*sophronismou*". Again, this is the only place it is used in the Bible, but it is used in other ancient works, such as Josephus and even Aesop. It is a tough one to pin down in English, so let me use a metaphor.

Imagine a child that wants to please her parents and thus behaves in a sincere attempt to do so. However, she makes mistakes as she acts and the parent must offer correction. Instead of becoming indignant with the parent, saying things like "I tried my best!" or "I was only trying to do what you told me to!", the child listens to and appreciates the correction and is determined to grow from it, always knowing that the correction doesn't invalidate her as a person or her relationship with the parent. Thus, the word describes a person whom is acting out **God's** will according to **His** reasoning, not ours. It is an acceptance that wisdom without God is folly, no matter how correctly we think we are doing it.

How many Christians today are behaving because they have decided that God's will should be theirs,

instead of the other way around? How many have become enraptured with their own wisdom?

The take-home message here is that **none** of the qualities in this verse (courage, love, tolerance for discipline) are ours. They belong to the Spirit. They are evidence of the Spirit working through us. They are not evidence of our strong wills, our slogans, or our stoic steadfastness. Paul is reminding Timothy to get out of the way and let the Spirit use him to encourage, support, and proclaim the truth of Christ, **no matter** what threats the world offers and no matter what punishments it inflicts.

I hope everyone got something out of this. It is a difficult message.

September 13, 2020

Hope you are having a good Sunday. I'd like to share some thoughts with you today.

I'm currently reading a book written by a man who was raised in the Ahmadi movement of Islam (Christians: think Luther's Reformation for a rough approximation in Christianity) but who chose to follow Christ instead, at great personal cost. I am now to the part of the book where he outlines the arguments that started to shake his Islamic beliefs, specifically the two key beliefs that separate Islam from Christianity:

- 1) Jesus was not divine.
- 2) Jesus did not actually die on the cross (the so-called "swoon theory").

But the valuable part of the book to me was the window into the Islamic religious structures and their cultures, a world about which I was entirely ignorant. There were points when I had to chuckle a little bit, admittedly, at the parallels between Islam and Christianity. For instance, I had no idea how fragmented and sectarian Islam is. I thought Christianity took the prize on that with all of our denominations, but Islam has quite a few divisions as well beyond just Shia and Sunni. I also didn't realize that many Muslims believe that the four Gospels are true (except for the crucifixion part). They see them as somewhat of a corollary volume to the Quran. They believe that the rest of the Bible, though, is corrupt and damaged; by contrast, the Quran is exactly what Gabriel said to Muhammad in the late 4th century,

word for word. Thus, Islam also has its own debates about literalism versus interpretation. It has been quite eye-opening to learn these things.

But the part I want to address today is the nature of authority. In Islamic religious culture, the imams and other top religious figures are unassailable. Every word they utter is truth. "Rank-and-file" Muslims do not dare question that authority because it is assumed that these religious leaders have done all the hard thinking for everyone. Children are taught that they are simply to obey what the imams and the hadiths say. For instance, the author of the book I've referenced tells us that they didn't say "I love you" in his Muslim home. Love was evidenced through obedience to parents and to the hadiths that governed Muslim behavior. Those chosen by bloodline to be the

Islamic authorities are simply to be believed and followed, and it is not the position of the individual Muslim to wonder about or dispute the truth or rationale of anything Islamic. This was the first personal battle that the author talks about fighting in his book; not the doctrine itself, but the guilt and anxiety that even asking questions about that doctrine generated.

At this point, I actually put the book down for a bit. I was disturbed by something and I needed to process it. Soon I realized that his description of the Islamic authority structure over doctrine and belief was, in reality, not that different from 21st century Christianity.

I Timothy 3 discusses the role of the "overseer" (*episkopos, ἐπίσκοπος*) in the church. The English words "elder", "pastor", and "bishop" come from this Greek word. Over the centuries, many Christian denominations have taken this singular concept and built a middle-management model of church authority, with layers of management placed in power over ever-widening geographical regions of churches. The modern church has come to resemble corporations more than anything. While there are arguable benefits to such structure (primarily operational ones), it occurs to me that the side effects might not be worth it in the end.

One of those side effects is the explicit or implicit assignment of authority over doctrine and church behavior to those at the top of the structure. Edicts,

approvals, and policy statements are passed down through the ranks to the local churches. Matters of applied social doctrine ("what we believe about X") are written in books sanctioned by denominational leaders. In our zeal to be the "shepherds and guides" and protect the flock, each individual sheep is being gradually relieved of the responsibility for being the "overseer" of their own mind and soul. Pastors and elders then start to carry the burdens of all of those people on themselves because they believe that is their task, and many people of the church are more than happy to let the church speak and think for them. Thus, a vicious cycle is created, leaving churches full of attendees who have long since forgotten why they are there and are upset that the church leaders aren't reminding them.

This pandemic has amplified this effect. How many that have been separated from their church families for valid public health reasons have begun to realize that their faith is emptier than they thought? How many have been faced with key questions about their beliefs this year because of our trials, but either cannot or will not answer them? How many this year have thought, "Why do I even believe this stuff anyway?"

We can sit in judgment of Islamic beliefs about doctrinal authority all we want as Christians, but what dawned on me is that many Christian churches are implicitly doing the same thing, today, in 2020.

We need to stop making pastors and elders responsible for our own faith.

We need to stop relying on church leaders to tell us what the answers are.

We need to stop the church from becoming the many, ruled by the few.

I'll finish with a story from the book. The author met a friend during his first year in college. He knew this friend was a Christian, but they liked each other and had honest discussions about faith. One day, early in the friendship, they were on a trip together and were sharing a room for a few days. After unpacking, the friend sat down and began to read his Bible. The author, still Muslim at that time, shares his first thought with the reader when he saw this happen, and it was a crushing thought for me personally.

He had no idea that American Christians ever did that.

If that doesn't make you just a little sad, I'm not sure what to tell you.

September 20, 2020

Greetings on this Sunday morning. I'd like to discuss a commonly-known saying of Christ today, and why it must be better understood among believers today.

Luke writes in Chapter 16, starting with verse 13:

"No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the

sight of God. The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void."

Most people quote the Matthew version of verse 13, and know it well. I like the Luke version better, though, because we see exactly what Jesus was doing by saying what He said. Let me quickly outline a few things that some people, I think, miss about this conversation he had with the Pharisees.

First, note that there is no third option offered. Jesus says we **must** choose either the things of God or the things of man. We cannot have both, but we also

cannot have neither. Every one of us, every day, makes this choice, over and over again: this kingdom or God's. Why do I say "kingdom"? Because the next verses make it clear that Jesus was juxtaposing kingdoms. So like it or not, you serve something just by being human and alive. You can't get out of this question.

Second, the verse has nothing to do with money.

Were the Pharisees the only people listening to Jesus that day that had money? I would find that hard to believe. If so, how did the early church have any resources to share at all, as it says they did in Acts?

The word is *μαμωνᾶ* (*mamona*), which symbolizes anything that receives our full trust. It is derived from a Semitic term and everyone listening would have known that it isn't a specific object that is being

described (such as money), but it is whether that object is more important than God. This verse does not mean Christians must be poor. It does not mean that money is evil. It does not mean that having nice things means you are not faithful. It means exactly what Christ said to the rich man when He told him to "sell all [he had] and follow [Him]." Show that Jesus is more important than anything else. Would you?

Third, the word for "lovers of money" is probably best translated "greedy" or "covetous". Greedy for what? Greedy for earthly power. Greedy for earthly status. Greedy for earthly influence. Money just hitches a ride on all that. Every generation that passes, the church becomes less and less important to the world because it doesn't offer earthly gain, but it was never supposed to do that. Somewhere along the way, we

have decided that it should, and now we have become disappointed in it because of that unfair expectation.

Fourth, Jesus tells us how to know what our brother has chosen. Do you spend your time convincing everyone around you how strong a Christian you are, or do you worry more about your relationship with God? Do you seek out ways to elevate yourself in the kingdom, or do you allow God to be elevated in spite of you? Contrary to popular opinion, generations have not become more selfish. We have simply become more willing to identify and call out the selfishness in the church that existed long before and has become more starkly visible as time has passed.

It is difficult not to argue that, as a church in this world, many have decided that they are tired of waiting on God. If He won't make this world better like He promised, then we will do it for Him. We have chosen this world over His, and have become willing to compromise any part of our faith that gets in the way of that.

Please decide today that you will choose God, not this world, no matter what happens around us. Make a choice every day to devote yourself to and trust in the eternal rather than the transient. Don't throw your pearls before swine.

November 1, 2020

I haven't done my Sunday messages for a while - I hope you will indulge me.

This week, I've had some good conversations with my father. He lives eight hours away so our conversations are virtual, but they are always good nonetheless. I don't think there is anyone I know who treasures his faith more than he does. It defines who he is, he seeks it out in all things, and it is his lantern in the darkness (I could say the same thing for my mother, too). While I certainly learned from them as a child, as the years have gone by I've walked my own path to God. Granted, it has been a path full of traps, obstacles, stumbles, and even unbelief, but it was my path. So while we agree on so much theologically, there are always things to debate and discuss. To be

honest, I wish there was more of that in our churches as well. But I digress.

Recently our discussion was centered on the near-impossible task of maintaining spiritual purity when immersed in the worldly pursuits of politics and power. At one point, he said he wanted some time to process what we had talked about, which is one thing he and I share; we are very deliberate and thoughtful about what we say. As I did other tasks, later that day I got a text from my father. He was sharing a prayer that the president of a Christian college in Missouri, his alma mater, had written. I want to share it with you all now.

Father God,

As we approach a national election, we pray first for peace. We lift up prayers and intercessions, as Paul told us, for kings and all those in authority that we may live peaceful and quiet lives. We seek, as Jeremiah did, the peace and prosperity of the city and the nation in which we live, for if it prospers, we too will prosper. In a time of division, protect us from national upheaval, and give us peace so that we may live in all godliness and holiness. We pray for peace.

Lord, we pray second for discernment.

The issues of our day are many and

weighty: racism, abortion, immigration, war and peace, health care, economic justice, the role of government, and the freedom to practice our faith. Help us to understand the truth of your Word, and what we lack in wisdom, we pray you would give generously. With the gospel, form our conscience that we may vote wisely. We pray for discernment.

Lord, we pray third for grace. Open our eyes to see those with different opinions, not as enemies, but as precious souls, made in your image, for whom Christ died. Fill us with a spirit of charity toward those who may see us as enemies, and when we are opposed

and even attacked, give us the patience of Christ himself, who asked forgiveness for those who drove the nails. We pray for grace.

Lord, we pray fourth for faith. When fear and anxiety seek to overwhelm us, fill our eyes with a vision of you, our King, on your throne in sovereign power, and may the puny politics of this world, which seem to loom so large, resume their proper size. Remind us of the temporary nature of nations and the eternal nature of your kingdom, and keep our trust in you. We pray for faith.

Lord, we pray finally for repentance.

For all the blessings we enjoy, we are a people far from you. Convict us of our personal sins, forgive us of our national sins, and spark revival in the land. May every heart turn toward you and every knee bow before you. May we return to you like the prodigal son, and when we do, crown us with your compassion, cover us with your mercy, and embrace us with your love. We pray for repentance.

And above it all, through it all, we pray that the name of Jesus Christ would be the name on every lip, that his name would be magnified in this nation and

in all nations, for your glory and for the world's good. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Take a moment to ask yourself:

"Does that sound anything like what so many Christians are saying today?"

"Does that sound like what I am saying?"

"Does that sound like the way I am acting?"

"And if not, why not?"

God doesn't need politics or power to be God, and people who need God don't need politics or power to find Him.

December 6, 2020

Good Sunday morning. I'd like to share some thoughts with you.

Luke 12 is a great chapter. I'll do a "flyover" of it this morning. But first, I do have to say that while the concepts of chapters and verses help to organize the Scripture and make things easier to find, they do it a disservice sometimes. So, to begin my musings, let me actually retreat to Luke 11.

The latter half of Luke 11 describes a rather heated conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees, the teachers of the law that were trying to expose Jesus as false, as a charlatan. At the end of the chapter, we read:

*"When Jesus went outside, the Pharisees
and the teachers of the law began to oppose
him fiercely and to besiege him with
questions, waiting to catch him in
something he might say." (Luke 11: 53-54)*

So this is clearly a scene of public conflict, and Chapter 12 picks up by describing people pressing in all around Jesus "so that they were trampling on one another." Can you imagine how the Jews felt? Here was the Messiah in front of them and they wanted to hear more, but the ruling powers were watching them, waiting to condemn them for believing. Perhaps some in the crowd were just there to watch the carnage. Maybe others were on the Pharisees' side and wanted Jesus to be arrested. But no matter what

individual motives existed, the panic, chaos, and doubt in that group is clear from the text.

So Jesus begins to speak. He first directs his words to the disciples specifically (verses 1-12), telling them that the authorities of earth should not be feared. He encourages them not to fear for their lives, their safety, or their earthly existence, and that if need be, the Pharisees and the rulers of this earth can take it all. None of it matters in the end.

Then someone from the crowd interrupts and asks Jesus to rule over a dispute with a family member (verse 13). This man is most likely trying to use Jesus' authority as leverage over earthly things. In reply, Jesus tells him the parable of the rich fool that spends all his time gathering earthly things and looking to a

future that he doesn't have (verses 14-21). His comments are indirectly aimed at the Pharisees as well, of course, notorious for seeking after social power and position through Roman appeasement and appeal to their status as teachers.

With that interruption handled, He turns back to the disciples. This makes the crowd around him a spectator to proceedings rather than a participant. He speaks perhaps the most well-known words of this chapter (verses 22-34). He tells the disciples that God is their only provider, not a government or a ruler, and that the Kingdom of God should be their priority, not kingdoms of earth. He finishes by teaching them that where their treasure is, there also will be their heart.

The "heart" in the ancient world was the symbol for our "selves". It was our essence and was thought to be the center of our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Whatever the heart desired most would be what that person would value most. But even if those desires sound really good on the surface, they can be still be compromised. Satan will even use desires that we **think** are of God to turn us from Him. So Jesus said that we must be watchful (verses 35-40) and that we must never lose sight of our true Master and the trust that He has placed in us to disciple others (verses 42-48). Finally, He warns us that we should expect our desire for God to turn others against us as they chase desires that are not of Him, just as Jesus' presence on earth brought division, upheaval, and ultimately, His death (verses 49-53).

I think the times in which we live are perfectly illustrated by Jesus' words in this chapter. There are so many false teachers in this world that treasure counterfeit desires. They act as if Jesus is a lever for earthly incentives while claiming He is not. So the final message of Luke 12 is critically important today.

"He said to the crowd: 'When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time? Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right? As you are going with your

adversary to the magistrate, try hard to be reconciled on the way, or your adversary may drag you off to the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny." (Luke 12: 54-59)

Take up your cross daily. Crucify desires that are not for God's true Kingdom. Be vigilant and watchful.
Have a good day.

December 20, 2020

Good Sunday morning. A few thoughts today...

"Drain the swamp". How many times have we heard this over the last 4 years? Swamps are stereotyped as nasty, disgusting places, not like our pristine lakes and rivers. If we just get rid of them, everything will be better, right? Government will be better, the USA will be a Rockwell painting!

Did you know that:

- 1) The Fertile Crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (the Garden of Eden, Christian folks) is a swamp, as well as the richest biodiversity area in the region?

- 2) Wetlands are one of the most adaptable regions on earth because they are neither land nor water totally, but a hybrid of both.

- 3) They have numerous ecological uses, such as flood protection, storm surge protection, and water purification (mostly from chemicals humans add to the water)?

But in America, we have been draining swamps for decades. A lot of San Francisco is built on drained wetlands. And the environmental damage has been huge in many places, including coastal erosion, sinking cities, and species loss. Remember Katrina? New Orleans flooded much more substantially because we drained the protective wetlands around

the city. Do you like eating fish and shellfish? Almost 70% of those species live in the wetlands.

This is so typical of humanity, isn't it? We find something we don't like, that seems irredeemable, and then we just destroy it so we don't have to look at it. We think everything will be better when the "eyesore" is gone. We can make that land in our image, stripping it of its purpose and causing harm in the process.

Personally, I'm glad that God doesn't do that to us. In His eyes, we're all pretty dirty. We all smell bad. We all have really no value in ourselves. But a lot of us like to compare. We may be dirty, but not as dirty as they are. We may smell, but they smell worse. We go to church - they don't. We believe in God - they don't.

So we have not just the right but the duty to call for them to be "drained" without any expectation that the standard we apply can be applied to us.

Christ told us to make disciples, not purify governments. He told us to do so in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, not government or a constitution. He told us to share his teachings with them, not legislate them. He came to this earth under a corrupt Roman government, had His mortal life taken from Him by that government, and yet He left it intact as He ascended.

He never told us to drain swamps, because if anyone had the right to do that, it was Him.

This Christmas, let's all re-center ourselves on Christ.

Peace.

December 24, 2020

Sometimes I read something that really convicts me. It makes me think deeply about what I believe and whether I've got it all right or not. That has happened a lot on social media, honestly, as I learn from others' viewpoints.

Believers - when you feel that conviction, you have two choices. You can embrace it and try to figure out what God is telling you, or you can label it as "hate", "lies", "Satan", or whatever without thinking about it at all. Unfortunately, there is a lot of the latter choice going on.

What if Mary had done that to Gabriel?

What if Joseph had done that to Mary?

What if Joseph had done that to God after the dream?

What if the Magi had done that and reported back to Herod?

How many of God's messages have we missed because they don't fit what we think He should have said?

This Christmas, let's really examine our hearts and make sure that it is God we are following, not our own ideas. That's the best gift you can give yourself.

Best wishes to all of you, believer or not. I hope your Christmas is still joyful and full of peace, no matter what's going on around us.

December 27, 2020

Good Sunday. I hope you'll allow me to share a thought or two.

Recently, I had a minor disagreement with a friend, one I've known for decades. I thought this person was assailing my character, this person clarified, hatchets were buried. But during the "hatchet-burying" process, the question was asked (paraphrased): "We need to make judgments sometimes, don't we?"

Indeed we do. Dutifully, I responded with a passage that many people, believer or not, have heard: "Judge not, lest you be judged." I did so not as a retort, but as a way to make the point that while judgment is not taboo in the Christian faith at all (otherwise the gift of discernment would be meaningless), we must be

aware that any measuring stick that we use to judge will be used against us as well. It's a sort of "check and balance."

In response, this person kindly noted that, in their view, my social media posts are left-leaning, which is not consistent with their worldview and which leads them to disagree with them. My reply to that statement has actually been on my mind since then, and I wanted to share it.

I wrote (paraphrased) that "whether one sees something as right or left says a great deal about where one was standing at the time."

It has dawned on me that God was showing me another angle on the Matthew 7 passage I used

during the conversation. It's not just that we have to be willing to be judged on the same issues or behaviors by which we judge others. It's also that we have to always be mindful of where our hearts are - where we "stand."

When we judge a meal as "good" or "bad", I would guess that most of us do so relative to other similar meals. The gumbo might be quite good, unless we just visited New Orleans. The steak might be well-prepared, but to the person that just ate at Ruth's Chris, it's rather unremarkable. Atheists see believers as uninformed, childish, and ignorant - believers see atheists as hopeless, unhappy, and lost. Similarities between the two things being compared are lost or minimized - all that remains are the stark differences that may or may not reflect reality.

Of course, we can try to judge something as objectively as possible (baking contests, dog shows, etc.), but even those judges can be swayed by prior experiences or preferences.

I think now that Jesus was reminding us that there is a Newtonian physics, of sorts, in judgments, an "equal and opposite reaction" that will occur. As my friend judged me and my viewpoints as "left-leaning", I noticed that I was simultaneously judging my friend's viewpoints as "right-leaning". Thus, it becomes very difficult on the spur of the moment to determine whether our judgments are accurate according to facts, or just a reflection of what we each personally believe - that is, where we stood when we looked.

How much of our judgment of others is just a function of what we have already "pre-judged"? Are we really judging (discerning) things on their merits, or are we just applying pre-fabricated judgments to everything around us based on where we are standing?

In my field, there are terms for this - "confirmation bias", "template matching", concepts that were birthed in the late 20th century. Yet, Jesus already knew about them. He knew that He would be judged on pre-fabricated templates, not on His words. He knew that He would be evaluated poorly by many because of where they stood, not because of what He said.

My prayer in 2021 is that all of us, believer or not, take some time in January to really do a self-

inventory. Be harsh. Be brutal. Be vicious. Strip out anything that is there that you can't be sure where it came from. Remove anything that you've just mindlessly been following or doing. If you've never put your "self" to the test, and that includes your views on God and faith, then how can you defend it? Perhaps our first and harshest judge should be ourselves, guided by the Spirit.

So, yes, sometimes we have to judge things. That doesn't mean we have to do it poorly.

December 31, 2020

Good morning. It's an icy/snowy New Year's Eve where I am. Hope you all are well. On the last day of a year unprecedented in recent American history, I wanted to share a word.

2020, at the very least, has forced us all to not just consider something unpleasant, but to look deep into its cold eyes. 2020 has re-introduced Americans to the fragility of life.

2020 has made death very real to us all.

Of course, it was always there. Nearly 3 million Americans die every year. But this year, it was daily, hourly, news. It sat in our living rooms like Poe's raven. We would swat at it, scream at it to leave us

alone, but there it sat, mocking us. It still sits...and we are terrified of it.

It's a harsh reminder. Thus, I am prayerful that this message will be of comfort.

Luke 8, beginning in verse 40, tells the story of Jarius and his daughter. Jarius was a leader of a synagogue, and probably put himself at great risk socially and professionally by asking Jesus, the despicable revolutionary, to come to his home and heal his daughter. The child was sick and near death, and Jarius was desperate. Jesus agreed to go.

But on the way, there were interruptions. A woman touched the garment Jesus was wearing and was

healed, and Jesus took time to speak to her in verse

48:

"Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace." (Luke 8:48)

To Jarius, this was probably very annoying. I can imagine that he stood by Jesus, doing everything he could not to grab Him by the collar and drag Him through the crowd to his dying child. Wouldn't we? "Come on, Jesus, we're wasting time! Let that woman be!"

But look at what Jesus says here. He calls the unknown woman "daughter." Of all the things He could have called her, He chose "daughter", as Jarius waited and listened. I think Jesus did this

intentionally. I think He was trying to tell Jarius that his little girl was **already** healed, at the moment that he placed his faith in Jesus to do so. The woman received healing because of faith moving her to action; Jesus didn't even know she was there, and how many other people touched Him in that moment?

Then He says, "Your faith has healed you." Jarius, are you listening? I hope he was. Because in verse 49, he was completely crushed. His daughter had died, and he was told not to bother Jesus anymore. Hear the finality in that? Death has won; we no longer have hope. But Jesus told him: "Do not fear; just believe." Jesus is trying to get Jarius to see that faith leads to Jesus' healing, not the other way around.

When he reaches the home, only three disciples and the parents are allowed into where the girl rested. All the other mourners were left outside, but not before Jesus told them that the girl was not dead, but merely sleeping.

"Did you hear that? I think we all know what death looks like, right? And this guy waltzes up with his matter-of-fact tone and tries to tell us that she's sleeping? You breathe when you sleep, Jesus! We know you can heal sickness, but this is death! The end! What can you possibly do?"

The key word here is in this verse. The Greeks used multiple words for death, the two most common

being *θάνατος* (*thanatos*) and *νεκρός* (*nekros*) and derivatives thereof. We get words like "thanatology" and "necrosis" from them. But that's not the word used here. This word here comes from the root *ἀποθνήσκω* (*apothnesko*), which signifies a "dying away from" or a "withering away". It is often used in Paul's letters to denote "dying" to our old selves. Even more, it is written in a Greek verb tense that indicates an acute event with no time horizon.

In English, the closest we can get here is that Jesus was telling them that the girl was in the process of death, but that process was not complete. English needs more words to get the same idea across.

So they all laughed at Him. Like Sarah did. Like the chief priests and Pharisees did. They mocked Him as foolish.

But that was no matter. Jesus just calmly turned to the girl, took her lifeless hand, and said, "Child, arise (*egeire*)!" "Egeire" (*ἐγείρε*) is from the Greek word for arising from sleep. Jesus literally told this dead girl to "wake up"! And at that moment, her spirit "returned". By the way, the word for "returned" here (*ἐπέστρεψεν*, *epestrepson*) is used most often in the Bible to identify repentance of the soul, back to God.

You see, the story of Jarius' daughter is the story of us. We are all dying. This world is dying. God exists above that process, outside of time, and He is waiting for us to touch His cloak. He is waiting for all of us to

be desperate enough that no matter what the cost, we will let faith lead us to Him so that He can kneel by our bedsides and tell us to "wake up."

2020 has definitely reminded us all how close death can be, for any of us, at any time. But there is no fear for those who are of God. Live every moment that you are given knowing that what is eternal in you has been "returned" from death by the miracle of Christ.

May 2021 richly bless you all.