

Devotions – August 20-26, 2017

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New Evangelical Lutheran Parish

Ewen, Paynesville, Trout Creek

Sunday, August 20

Read: Matthew 15:10-28

But Peter said to Jesus, “Explain this parable to us.”

“A squirrel is on the trunk of a tree. You watch as a dog runs around the tree trying to catch sight of the squirrel. The squirrel, of course, runs around the trunk of the tree – always staying on the side of the trunk that faces away from the dog. Has the dog gone around the squirrel?” It was a question asked in my first college philosophy class. I answered, “Yes.” One of my classmates answered, “No.” I knew I was in trouble when the professor said we were both correct. “Please, explain this to me,” I said.

“It depends upon how you define ‘around.’ If around means first being north, then east, then south, then west, and finally north again of the squirrel; the answer is yes. If around means first being in front of, then to the left of, then in back of, then to the right of, and finally in front of the squirrel; the answer is no.” I rolled my eyes and sighed. It was going to be a *long* semester!

Sometimes, Jesus’ teachings can feel this way. In this passage, Peter gets an explanation of the teaching about what defiles a person. However, we don’t get an explanation of what happens next. A woman asks for Jesus to heal her daughter. She is not Jewish, not an Israelite, and Jesus initially ignores her. She persists, Jesus’ followers ask him to send the woman away, and so he responds – first dismissing her request, then comparing her to a dog, and finally granting her request. I want to go to Jesus as Peter did and say, “Please, explain this to me.”

Earlier in Chapter 15, we see Jesus discussing traditions of faith with the Pharisees and the Scribes. Jesus has challenged them to see how they are using one tradition to excuse the violation of another tradition. And he accuses them of giving only lip service to God, not truly serving the God who is behind the traditions. Does this Gentile woman become another example for the disciples? As cruel as it initially seems to us, is this a teaching moment for the disciples?

The disciples say that they are following Jesus, but they want him to send this woman away. She has a genuine need, she has great faith, but they do not want anything to do with her. She’s not an Israelite, and she’s annoying them with her shouting after Jesus. Does Jesus say what the disciples are thinking? The woman does not give up. She is faithful. She may be outside the traditions, but she is faithful. She is NOT just giving lip service to God; she is acting upon her faith. And Jesus ultimately grants her faithful request.

This is not a fully satisfying answer for me. I don’t want Jesus to be cruel to this woman in order to teach his disciples a lesson. I don’t like the idea that Jesus uses her as an object lesson for that

teaching moment. I still want to go to Jesus and say, “Please, explain this to me.” I guess faith is all about being like the woman ... persistent ... never giving up ... always coming to Jesus and saying, “Lord, help me!”

Let us pray. Jesus, help us to come to you in all things. Help us to trust that you will respond and give us what we need, even when the world seems to be telling us otherwise. Amen



Monday, August 21

Read: Psalm 87

Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon ...

I recently received a friend request on Facebook from someone whose name I did not recognize. Before I confirmed the request, I send her a private message asking how we knew each other. Her response was, “We don’t, but I think we’re related. Was your grandmother ...?” Indeed! She knew my Grandma’s maiden name, and it turned out that my grandmother and her great-grandmother were cousins. We are now Facebook friends, and perhaps someday we will meet face-to-face. She wants to come up to see the old homestead, after all.

Names will catch our attention, especially when they show up in places we don’t expect. This Psalm, for example. When I think of names that are associated with knowing God in the Old Testament, Babylon is not one that comes to mind. Neither is Rahab (another name for Egypt) or Philistia or Tyre or Ethiopia. In fact, these countries are better known as bitter rivals or enemies of the people of Israel. But somehow they recognize God and recognize the one whom God sent ... the one who was born in Zion.

The psalm doesn’t name the one who was born in Zion. I don’t know if the one referred to is the whole people of Israel or an individual, such as the Messiah or a prophet. Or perhaps it is a reference to faith itself – the faith in God that has been built in Zion, in God’s holy city. Whoever or whatever is being referred to, the nations see the power of God and come to Zion to worship. They come to know God as *their* God, Zion becomes *their* home, and God claims them as God’s people.

How do you recognize the one whom God sent? Does the name sound familiar? Do their actions identify them in some way? Has their faith been seen and heard in their deeds and words? How do you receive the one who has been sent to you? How do you respond? Will you sing and dance as the people of the nations do?

Let us pray. Jesus, help us to recognize you in the faces and voices of those who call us to live fully in our faith. Fill us with your Spirit so that others will see you in our deeds and words. Amen



Tuesday, August 22

Read: Romans 11:13-29

... for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

I was the alternate. I was not able to make it to the cheerleading tryouts, but there were only six girls who showed up, so they made me the alternate because I had been a cheerleader in the past. Then something happened and one of the girls had to drop out, and I became the sixth cheerleader. Did it mean that she was no longer a cheerleader? Yes, and no. She wasn't with us along the sidelines. She wasn't in uniform during the games. But she was pictured in the yearbook. Was I happy that she dropped out? Yes, and no. I enjoyed being a cheerleader, but I missed having her around.

As Paul talks about the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers, he reminds us that there is a mix of emotions for him. He is Jewish. He is one of the people of Israel. And yet his primary work is among the Gentiles. He remains a Jew, but his ministry to and among the Gentiles includes eating with them and other things that seem to go against his Jewish heritage. He celebrates that the Gentiles have come to faith in Jesus, but he grieves that some of the Jews have rejected Jesus as the Messiah.

And when it comes to God's love for the Jews and the Gentiles, Paul reminds the Gentiles that God will always love the Jews. Adding a new member to the family of faith doesn't mean God has stopped loving the previous members of that family. And if they seem to be rejecting God's new love for the Gentiles, then we will continue to pray that they come around in their thinking. "Don't go around bragging that God dumped them in order to love you," Paul says. God did what God did, and God can still love them just as much as God loves you.

As we go through life, we may be challenged in similar ways. We may see people who wear the name Christian and whom we think are not truly following God. While we may challenge them to examine their actions and test their actions in relation to Jesus' teaching, we need to remember that God loves all people and God has called all people to follow. We may need to challenge ourselves and examine our understandings of Jesus' teaching. It is possible that God is doing something spectacular through these people with whom we disagree. Just as God did with the Gentiles two thousand years ago.

Let us pray. *Jesus, help us to cling to your promises and your love for us. Help us to see how you are also working in the lives of others who are different from us. Amen*



Wednesday, August 23

Read: Matthew 8:1-13

Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him ...

In an episode of Babylon 5, an alien species called the Marcaab have contracted a terrible disease. The Marcaab doctor tells the lead human doctor, "It is 100% contagious and 100% fatal." They are all going to die. The question remains as to whether or not other species can be

infected by the virus. The space station is placed under quarantine until treatment or a cure can be found. Violence erupts, directed at the Marcaab people as others begin to fear that the plague will kill everyone on the station. In one scene, the Security Chief breaks up a fight, and the Marcaab who has been badly beaten reaches up toward him. The Chief reaches out, takes his hand, and helps him up – supporting him as they head toward the medical center for treatment.

He touched him. For many in the ancient world leprosy was like this plague. It was a horrible disease with no cure and no treatment. People with the disease were shunned and cast out from their communities. They were forced to call out, “Unclean! Unclean!” as they walked down the street, so that no one would come near them for fear of contracting the disease. They were untouchable. They were feared. And Jesus reached out his hand and *touched* this man, curing his disease.

Jesus then sends him to the priests – the priests who could examine his skin and declare him cured and clean. While we don’t hear any more from this man, we assume that he did as Jesus said ... that he went to the priests and showed them that he was cured ... that he offered the sacrifice of thanksgiving in accord with the Torah ... and that he then returned to his community – to his home and his family. Fortunately for us, he (or someone else) disobeyed Jesus’ instruction to “say nothing,” and we get to hear this story and learn from Jesus’ actions.

Perhaps you can think of some in our world who are considered untouchable. For whatever reason, are there people whom you would not approach ... people whom you would shun ... people whom you would cross the street to avoid meeting? Perhaps we need to consider why that is the case. What is it that causes us to avoid some people? We may not change what we do ... for perhaps there are indeed justifiable reasons ... but we need to always remember that Jesus touched the untouchable and God loves even those whom we shun.

Let us pray. Jesus, help us to examine why we avoid certain people. Help us to change our ways where they need to be changed. Help us to see your love for all people. And help us to pray for all those whom you love. Amen



Thursday, August 24

Read: John 1:43-51 (Bartholomew, Apostle)

Philip said to Nathanael, “Come and see.”

Today, as I write this devotion, I learned something new ... actually two things. First, I learned that August 24 is a day when we remember Bartholomew who is listed among the Twelve Apostles in Luke 6:14, Mark 3:18, Matthew 10:3, and again in Acts 1:13. (Bartholomew is never mentioned in the Gospel of John.) Second, I learned that Nathanael, who shows up in John 1 with Philip and again in John 21 with a group of disciples, is often associated with Bartholomew in early Christian writings – as perhaps being the same person by a different name.

While August 24 is set aside as the day to remember Bartholomew, we know almost nothing about him. His name shows up on the lists of the Twelve, but he doesn't show up anywhere else in the New Testament ... unless he is indeed Nathanael. What we know about Nathanael is that he and Philip were friends, since Philip goes out to find him and to tell him about Jesus (John 1), and that he knows something about fishing, since he goes out in the boat with Simon Peter and some others (John 21). Apparently, he also speaks his mind without hesitation – first insulting anybody from Nazareth as he talks with Philip and then quickly declaring Jesus to be Son of God and King of Israel once they meet.

Having learned some new things, I pondered how I might be able to apply these new things to my understandings of faith and life. Here are a few ideas that I've come up with:

- What people say our name is doesn't matter much, as long as Jesus knows who we are. And Jesus *does* know who we are, because he can see us every moment of every day ... just as he saw Nathanael/Bartholomew under the fig tree.
- Trusting our friends can bring us great blessings. When a friend says something is great, even if we think they're misguided or wrong, we can go along when they say, "Come and see." We just might meet God in the process.
- Sharing our skills, jumping in to help, and being part of the work is important. When the opportunity arises for us to do some work and we are capable of doing that work, we can offer to help. Again, we just might meet God in the process.
- It never hurts to pause and praise Jesus – even if it seems totally out of the blue. After all, Jesus just might tell us, "You'll see greater things than these," when we announce our trust in him.

Let us pray. *Jesus, fill us with your Spirit so that we hear your call and follow you as Bartholomew did. Amen*



Friday, August 25

Read: Ezekiel 31:15-18 (and maybe 31:1-14, too)

Which among the trees of Eden was like you in glory and greatness?

Have you ever cheered for the underdog? In the midst of the big tournament, as the unexpected player excels during the big match, when the lowest on the totem pole defeats one at the top, we tend to cheer for the "little guy" at the bottom. It is somewhat satisfying when the greatest team falters or when the cocky favorite is defeated. Perhaps it gives us hope that we won't always be the one at the bottom. Perhaps it should also be a reminder that greatness is temporary at best.

The description in Ezekiel is of a lofty tree created by God. It grew so tall and so high that it began to think of itself as being the greatest of all trees. And perhaps, in some ways, it was. However, the tree began to glory in itself, rather than the God who created it, and the Lord says that the day is coming when the tree will experience a mighty fall. Ezekiel brings this message to the leaders of the nation as a warning that greatness is fleeting. Both Assyria and Egypt are

named and their leaders will be given the prophet's warning that a fall is coming soon. Perhaps this is also a lesson for all leaders of nations and for all of us.

God has created us. God has given us great gifts and individual strengths and talents. We can indeed use the gifts entrusted to us and we can build upon our strengths and talents. We can create great things in the process. However, we need to be careful when we start seeing the gifts and strengths and talents as something that makes us great ... greater than others ... or somehow privileged in the eyes of God ... as if we are more important than others.

God has created *all* of us. God has given *all* of us gifts and strengths and talents. And God has called *all* of us to use what has been entrusted to us in order to build up others and help others, not as a means to bring glory to ourselves. After all, *ALL people* are created by God and equally loved by God. While I don't think God steps in directly to take the haughty down a peg or two, I do think that God allows us to reap the consequences of our actions. And when we glorify ourselves, we set ourselves up for a big fall later ... like the greatest team that underestimates their underdog opponents.

Are there places in your life where you are feeling very small? Remember that God has created you and God has given you great gifts and talents and strengths. Are there places in your life where you are feeling very great? Remember that God has created you and your gifts and talents and strengths are to be used to help all the others whom God has also created. The glory of God is the only greatness that lasts forever. And God's greatest glory is God's love for all people – shown in Jesus' death on the cross.

Let us pray. *Jesus, help us to love all people as you love them. Help us to celebrate your glory and your love by using our strengths to help others. Amen*



Saturday, August 26

Read: Ezekiel 36:33-38

Then they shall know that I am the Lord.

I love gardens. I enjoy seeing the beautiful flowers and greenery. I am entranced by the sounds of the wind rustling the leaves of trees. I am thrilled by the wonderful flavors of fresh produce. And I'm really good at killing plants. It's a terrible thing, but it's true. I tend to over-water or under-water the plants in my home and they die. The plants in my gardens outside do much better than the ones in my house, but I think that's because God is taking care of them, rather than relying upon me to do so.

If you've ever had a garden that didn't grow well, you can probably relate to the images in Ezekiel's vision. A dried up garden ... or a garden that has been so flooded that the plants have drowned ... is a terrible thing. Flowers don't bloom. Fruits and vegetables won't be produced. Trees lose their leaves. And only the power of God can revive what is left.

At times our lives feel like a dying garden. Sad times drown us in tears. Bad times parch the life out of us. We feel like we cannot bloom, we cannot share the happiness of others, we cannot offer anything good to those around us, because we are dead inside. Only the power of God can revive us.

Ezekiel's vision reminds us that God has not walked away or abandoned us. God has walked with us through this terrible time. God has suffered with us. And God has promised to give us new life. Sometimes that new life comes to us here on earth ... when our health is restored ... when a new job or new friends come our way ... when relationships are repaired ... Sometimes that new life comes through the gate of death and the grave – and it can be scary to contemplate that possibility.

No matter what way the new life comes to us, we can be confident that God is behind it and that God is with us through everything that happens. God touches our bodies as we move through the healing process, God encourages us as we apply for jobs and meet new people, God forgives us and gives us the power to forgive others, and God takes us by the hand and brings us to our eternal home. When the new life arrives, we will know that the Lord is our God.

Let us pray. *Jesus, in the midst of dark times, help us to see your light. Help us to cling to you and trust in you. And, please, give us new life. Amen*

