

Take the Grace -- Proper 21C

You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, and abide in the shade of the Almighty, say to the Lord, "My refuge, my stronghold, my God in whom I put my trust... It is indeed God who will free you from the snare of the fowler who seeks to destroy you. You will be concealed beneath God's pinions, and under God's wings you will find refuge!"

Psalm 91 is full of powerful imagery from Nature; also from war, and human distress and frailty. In the monasteries of the Benedictine tradition, Psalm 91 is said every evening at the service of Compline, the last service of the day before bed. You'll find Compline in your prayer book; it makes a sweet and rich way of ending your day – if you like that sort of thing.

Compline itself, and Psalm 91 in particular are invaluable parts of the spiritual tool kit God has provided to ease the journey and point out the way to lives of love, purpose and happiness. Because let's face it, this life to which the Gospels call us is awfully risky. The more available and compassionate we are, the more vulnerable to manipulation and hurt. Every time we allow ourselves to hear God's still, small voice telling us we have enough for ourselves, we risk discomfort and fear. Whenever we choose to compromise with others, forgive them and hold our tongue, there is the

possibility of disappointment, rejection, ingratitude, humiliation.

Yet Jesus and Luke and Paul and the Psalmist keep telling us to persist, to allow ourselves to be protected under the wings of God; to clothe ourselves in God's robes and put on the armor of light! Karl Barth comments on the letter to Timothy that we heard today, saying 'forever is now.' The Kingdom of God is at hand, right where we are, day-to-day; we are the ones responsible for its upkeep. And we have to dress the part. There is a dress code, but the fabric choice is wide open to each of us. We work to remember to put it around ourselves anew each day, each moment, and wear it until it is loose and soft and easy, like a favorite pair of jeans... only one that never wears out.

Jesus models the outfit for us, and gives us the encouragement we need to make the risky and self-forgetting fashion choices of peace, charity, and moderation despite our hesitation and fear. We are not left without help, but we must choose it. Paul Tillich points out that worldly wealth is unreliable as a source of comfort, because it is based on what is fleeting, while compassion is an unshakable foundation because it looks to the ultimate. But what a difficult choice it is to make consistently – it requires a lot of practice.

What do we do with our innate fears about not having enough? A few seasons ago, a famous, and

famously wealthy baseball star did a strange thing. In the middle of a league game, he pretended to be hit by a pitch. He pretended so well that the umpire was convinced and awarded him first base. Now I didn't read any interviews on the subject, so I don't know the ballplayer's story about why he felt compelled to do such a thing. I don't even know if he broke any explicit rules of the game. But from any angle, the act seemed bizarre. It can be effectively argued that this particular baseball player has had enough victory, enough fame, enough glory and enough money from the game of baseball to last his, his children's, even his grandchildren's lifetimes, especially if they stay out of the futures market. He has more of all of it than most everyone who ever played the game. So what could he have been thinking? For some reason, at that moment, none of it seemed like enough.

I don't know. I don't have to know. I have pulled enough questionable stunts in my life to understand that sometimes we fail. As a wise woman said, 'I have been the recipient of lots of love and forgiveness, who am I to withhold it from others? But how will we know we're on the right track? We cannot effectively see ourselves by ourselves. The reflective love of the other people with whom we nurture our faith, celebrate our lives and take social action, that love is the only way God has of making our desire for goodness, our failures to be good, and our forgivenesses clear and alive.

Archbishop Tutu has famously observed, God will not transform the World without us.

We are given explicit instructions and every imaginable opportunity to learn how. We heard about the rich man in Hades, who had daily stepped over the poor to get in and out of his palace. All he had to do was look, but he couldn't. Again and again we are assured, "take the chance, accept that you have enough, let go of your self-righteousness and attempts to control, let God speak to you of grace and peace, notice and care for the poor." "God will not transform the World without us," said Tutu, "and we cannot transform the World without God."

Because grace accepted will make all the difference. Grace habitually accepted will enable our transformation. As the dynamic translation of Saint Paul that we just heard has it, grace is an all-purpose, all-weather garment. This cloak will cover and protect us under all conditions. We in Western Culture who have the dubious and naïve luxury of sentimentalizing poverty must dig deep to understand the concept of enough. But only then can we accept the truth that our fears can never be chased away by our accomplishments, but will always be lessened when we accept the mighty cloak of Jesus' love. You let me hold your cloak and I will let you hold mine, and together we can grope, stumble, dance and run into the ever-becoming Kingdom.

The other Psalm that forms the structure of the Compline service is #4, which contains the single nugget of truth that will establish our salvation if we only would heed it:

When I call, answer me O God of justice*
From anguish you release me, have mercy and hear me.
O men, how long will your hearts be closed?*
Will you love what is futile and seek what is false.
It is the Lord who grants favor to those whom he loves,*
the Lord hears me whenever I call Him.
Fear Him, do not sin; ponder on your bed and be still.*
Make justice your sacrifice and trust in the Lord.
“What can bring us happiness?” many say,*
“Lift up the light of your face on us, O God.”
O Lord, you have given me greater joy,*
Than they have from abundance of corn and new wine.
I lie down in peace and sleep comes at once,*
For you alone Lord make me dwell in safety.

So it is: Open our hearts; help us strive to hear more than we say. And if we would see the face of God, if we would be happy, if we would sleep in peace, the only sacrifice we need make is true justice. It's in our great national declaration: “all...are equal.” All God wants is for us to accept, embrace and enact the courage of that conviction.