

The Sunday Missive – July 30, 2023

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Hymn 423 Immortal, invisible, God only wise

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great Name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above
Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all life thou givest, to both great and small;
In all life thou livest, the true life of all;
We blossom and flourish, like leaves on the tree,
Then wither and perish; but nought changeth thee.

Thou reignest in glory, thou rulest in light,
Thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
All laud we would render: O help us to see
'Tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zd0FyrzVUCM>

The Collect

O God, the protector of all who trust in you, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

1 Kings 3:5-12

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." And Solomon said, "You have shown

great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you."

Psalm 105

Give thanks to the Lord and call upon God's Name* ***Make known God's deeds among the peoples.***

Sing to the Lord, sing praises to God* ***And speak of all God's marvelous works.***

Glory in the holy name of God* ***Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.***

O search for the strength of the Lord* ***And continually seek the face of God.***

Remember the marvels the Lord has done* ***The wonders and the judgments of the mouth of God.***

O offspring of Abraham, O children of Jacob* ***Know the Lord's judgments will prevail in all the world.***

Who has always been mindful of each covenant* *The promises made to a thousand generations. Hallelujah!*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-th6C3sLAW>

Romans 8:26-39

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Hymn 291 We plow the fields and scatter

We plow the fields, and scatter the good seed on the land,
But it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand;
He sends the snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain,
The breezes and the sunshine, and soft refreshing rain.

Refrain:

All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above;
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord for all his love.

He only is the Maker of all things near and far;
He paints the wayside flower, he lights the evening star;
The wind and waves obey him, by him the birds are fed;
Much more to us, his children, he gives our daily bread. [Refrain]

We thank thee, then, O Father, for all things bright and good,
The seedtime and the harvest, our life, our health, our food:
The gifts we have to offer are what thy love imparts,
But chiefly thou desirest our humble, thankful hearts. [Refrain]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTejKRYz1FE>

or

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mURti-s0jc>

Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

Jesus put before the crowds another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

Elected by Whom? -- Proper 12A

“For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

What is this business of election we hear about throughout the Bible, this designation of chosenness that some people or peoples acquire and others do not? How can it be that a just and loving God, the creator and ultimate judge of humanity and all there is to judge, would single out some for peace and others for violence, some for gratification and others for frustration, some to have and others to have not?

Last week we read the story of Jacob’s dream, and considered the compelling argument that any higher power worth aligning oneself with, let alone worshipping, will have put the potential for grace in

every soul, the spark of divine fire within every heart, a diamond on every brow. By that reasoning, each of us has equal access to God's love, if only we will avail ourselves of it. And surely the chosen choose themselves; not only that, but their process of self-choosing must be ongoing throughout their conscious life. It makes more sense to say nobody in particular is preordained or pre-elected.

Here in America, we continue to have elections; in the face of various efforts to subvert the process, we are, at the moment still a democracy. Theoretically, what it takes to get elected is to have our desire to occupy and fulfill a certain office endorsed by more people than favor anybody else. Except maybe in Florida. So the idea of pre-election seems not only unfair; to us it is unfamiliar and foreign. We are uncomfortable with stories about promised lands. Many of us shudder to think of what took place right here in the name of 'manifest destiny' in the realm of political and economic affairs, so to apply such a designation in spiritual matters seems utterly wrong.

In one of our country's pivotal historical moments, President Kennedy observed, *"There is always inequity in life. Some men are killed in a war and some men are wounded, and some men never leave the country; some men are stationed in the Antarctic and some are stationed in San Francisco. It's very hard in military or in personal life to assure complete equality. Life is unfair."* And most of us would agree with him. Even in the face of painful statistics that clearly prove the connections among race, socio-economic status and access to health care, who gets terrible diseases seems pretty random, and who survives them randomer still. Life is unfair. But God is supposed to be fair.

Yet through the years many have taken this portion of Paul's letter to the Romans -- along with other remarks he makes along the same lines -- to mean that only certain individuals are chosen -- ahead of time -- by God for salvation. Perhaps it would be more useful and sensible to set this idea aside and remember how God's goodness comprises all of humankind. When we say 'all of creation groans with labor pains until now,' we recognize the ubiquity of grace -- it's everywhere available, and nowhere is it withheld to those with 'ears to hear.' We hear the phrase, 'many are called but few are chosen,' implying that God beckons all of us in love, but not all of us answer. We might just as easily say, 'many (as in all) are called and chosen, but few

(as in none) are able to respond by loving only God and being wholly inclined to God's purposes.

Does this mean that Paul is just plain wrong, as far as this issue of election is concerned? Or are we dealing with yet another of those sneaky paradoxes like the ones Jesus so often uses to get under our skin, to get inside our hearts and make us want to be the Body of the risen Christ? Perhaps Paul addresses himself to his Roman audience using the pronoun 'we,' with confidence that whoever hears him will self-identify as the chosen elect of whom he speaks. Perhaps his confidence is meant to engender its own justification, and he intends a self-fulfilling prophecy, like the passion engendered in a college football stadium, where, until the game has wound down (or exploded) to its conclusion, everyone 'knows' their team will win, Paul knows his audience to be among the elect.

All of us whose lives have been changed by encountering the passion of God's incarnate self in the world; all of us who identify ourselves as part of the eternally interconnected creation we christians call the Body of the risen Christ, all of us are more or less moved by this same kind of confidence and passion. And we ask, with Paul, "What can we say? If God is for us, who is against us?"

Paul knows, as do we, that only one team can win a particular contest. Truth to tell, our team might not win the game today, just as everyone who is chosen, (or called, however you want to put it), doesn't magically become sin-free and flawlessly, permanently virtuous in a twinkling. What we become is possessed of a deeper awareness of grace and glory than ever seemed possible before. What we come to realize is that this connection with the rest of Creation, and the obligations and accountability that go along with such a connection are not at all a matter of, 'my life's holier than thy life,' with or without Kenl Ration. The connection we share is offered freely to all, and nobody has any idea why some people can accept and nurture and bear witness to it, while others struggle to maintain a small measure of awareness, let alone consistency, and others still reject it entirely in favour of raw self-interest. What we feel is not so much elect, as e-lucked -- to coin a word -- we are the lucky ones.

Actually, there is already an obsolete English word, 'eluctation.' According to Webster, it means, "A bursting or struggling forth from some difficulty." Whatever imagery we favor most from our narrative traditions: Noah and his spectacularly dysfunctional family surviving a worldwide flood, or the people of Israel escaping 400 years of Egyptian slavery; King Solomon resisting the obvious temptations, to pray instead for wisdom and discernment, or Jesus' emptying himself of divine power so that we might glimpse a life without sin, all of these stories show human beings bursting the bonds of some fearsome difficulty. They are all about eluctation, and a choice made to answer the eager longing of God to welcome our emerging selves.

The same is true for every life that chooses to turn from fears -- however well founded -- and the self-centered shortsightedness they engender, and moves instead in the direction of equanimity, reconciliation and hope: taking the longer, wider view. As the proverb goes, 'the mountain is not there for us to reach the top, it is there so we may improve ourselves by climbing.'

It is a choice that is open to all of humankind. Maybe God knows already who will make this choice. So be it. One thing is clear, however, we ourselves can't possibly know what our choice will be until we make it. Then it becomes our treasure in the field, our pearl of great price. We will bear witness to the change in us, by bringing out what is old and what is new to share with all we meet. We will become, not the "Elect," but the "Eluct." And when we do, despite hardship, distress, persecution, nakedness, peril, or sword, we shall be more than conquerors through the one who loved us. Thenceforth, we too shall be persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God.

Hymn 594 God of grace and God of glory

God of grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power;
Crown thine ancient Church's story;
Bring her bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
For the facing of this hour; for the facing of this hour.

Lo! the hosts of evil round us scorn thy Christ, assail his ways!
From the fears that long have bound us
Free our hearts to faith and praise:
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
For the living of these days; for the living of these days.

Cure thy children's warring madness,
Bend our pride to thy control;
Shame our wanton, selfish gladness,
Rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
Lest we miss thy kingdom's goal; lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.

Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore;
Let the gift of thy salvation be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
Serving thee whom we adore; serving thee whom we adore.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5bk1IWYNZE>

For the Blind Man in the Basilica di Santa Croce, Florence

Our stories can only carry us so far. I know there are layers beneath the layers and you haven't asked but I would describe a fresco not even finished in the workshop, discovered beneath damaged plaster here in the *Scuola del Cuio*. A simple Madonna and child marked off with a draftsman's patience, a sketch of faces each etched with a different kind of cross. Evidence of a man working out art's proportions like a map in the sand: golden mean in the plaster and articulation balanced between the bridge in the distance for scale and the sketched-in step-child abandoned almost in the foreground, clutching at the mother's skirts—all the necessary work that gets covered over in the finish, smoothed out and blessed with plaster and color, that blinding light cast by the angelic child, mother adoring. I would describe it all—but that's easy and I am not so foolish anymore. I know you don't need me to tell you this. You know the chittering of swallows as they fill the courtyard of the cloister and the weight of sunlight on cypress and stone. If meaning is made of anything you will have heard it in the sound of great space that flows down the stairs of the Pazzi chapel, in the rattle of the tourist dragging his bag on the pavers as he moves toward enormous doors flung open into the heat.

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