

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 10, 2023.

On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the most comfortable and 1 being the least comfortable, today's lessons would be a 1. At least initially.

"Turn back, turn back from your evil ways." "Turn away the reproach which I dread." "You shall not ... you shall not ... you shall not." "Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." **(Matthew 18:18)**

It doesn't give one a positive, happy, comfortable feeling. I'm not sure I want to live under these conditions, these threats. If I were perfect, there wouldn't be anything to worry about. But I'm not perfect, so there's a lot to worry about. If it's not a 1 on the comfort scale, it's pretty darn close to a 1.

Isn't there something on the other end of the scale, the "more comfortable" end?

Well, it just so happens that there is a more desirable alternative. An alternative grounded in forgiveness and a second chance and even more chances beyond.

Here's the redeeming passage, the more optimistic passage, the more desirable passage: "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked." **(Ezekiel 33:11)**

Yes, a God who forgives. A God who sets the bar high, but recognizes that there will be times when we knock the bar off. A God who says "Let's try it again." A God who comes out of the stands and comes to the high jump pit, and is there every time we knock the bar off, and remarkably replaces the bar so that we can try again to clear the bar.

Yes, thanks to a forgiving God, our lessons this morning can be on the 10 end of the scale – the most desirable – rather than the 1 end of the scale – the least desirable.

That's why you and I are here. We want to thank God for giving us yet another chance to get things right, to honor God's love, to fulfill God's expectations, to be the kind of servant that God wants us to be. Indeed, that God creates us to be.

St. Paul speaks of “laying aside the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light.” **(Romans 13:12)**

And that we, in our best moments, want to be. No one drags us here. Now, maybe our kids and grandkids might disagree. But for adults, church is a free decision. We want to be, we choose to be, reminded of God’s Love, of God’s second and third and fourth chances.

But, as we consider these “second chances,” we should keep one thing in mind. And here it is: God can change His, Her, Its mind. God is not locked into “forgiveness.” Even though forgiveness is second nature to God, it’s not a given for you and me.

Which means that we shouldn’t count on it. Give thanks for it? Absolutely. But, take it for granted? No way. God would not be pleased, and, if truth be told, neither would we.

In our best moments, we know that we are at the mercy of God, and we believe, we trust, that God has our best interests in mind. From today’s Psalm: “Incline my heart to your decrees give me life in your ways.” **(Psalm 119:36-37)** This grateful attitude is what we desire for our children and grandchildren. Their time is coming. They will wrestle, intellectually and emotionally and spiritually, with the whole notion of a Loving God. And, in particular, with what this means for you and me and them.

This wrestling match has been going on for a long, long time. Can you say “Adam and Eve”? Every culture has some form of this Biblical episode. Every culture recognizes the tension that exists between obedience and disobedience. And every culture has adopted some approach to reconciling the two options.

And, what is even more interesting, you and I adopt such an approach. We’re here because the Biblical story of God’s love and forgiveness makes sense to us. It’s not the only story out there. But it reflects our experience, our self-awareness, and – a critical ingredient – our realization that we need intervention from somewhere or Someone to help us cope with Sin.

Yes, Capital S Sin. We don't always do what we should do. And often we do what we shouldn't do. Not all the time, by any means. But enough of the time to make us, not only think about the Creator's Love, but accept that Love, and the many, many second chances that you and I are afforded.

For many of us, if not all of us, regular worship is a given. Which means that an opportunity for confession and absolution always exists. Be honest now. Has there ever been a time when, given the opportunity to confess one's sins, we have scratched our heads and said "What sin?"

I doubt it. We know better. We don't dwell on it. But we recognize our condition, and so we seek an assurance of God's forgiveness. That's what the Church does. It provides an opportunity to do what we need to do, and what we want to do. Namely, to get right with the Lord.

Now, often we go through the confession and absolution sequence in the presence of others. But not all the time. Sometimes, maybe more often, we go through this drill when it is just "You and me" Lord.

Whether alone or in company, we are grateful for the Lord's Presence. God hears our confession, and God reminds us of His, Her, Its forgiveness. It's called Absolution. It lifts the weight of Sin.

Imagine life without some relief from the knowledge that we have disappointed our Lord. Indeed, imagine life without some relief from the knowledge that we have disappointed one another. It's not a happy picture. We wouldn't wish that weight, that heaviness on anyone.

And God doesn't wish that weight on us either. God steps into history and addresses the weight by taking it on Himself, Herself, Its Self. That what the Cross is all about. As Jesus is suffering, our chances for redemption are increasing.

That's the relationship of cosmic forces that you and I review and give thanks for each time we gather. It's also the relationship of forces that you and I experience each time we pray alone. And what we discover in those moments, both public and private, is that we are never alone.

We have a name for that special capital P Presence. That Name is the Holy Spirit. That dimension of the Creator that knows no boundaries. That dimension that is continually present in our lives, inviting us to honor the Lord's Love. And to seek forgiveness when that honoring falls short, **and** to accept that forgiveness.

God doesn't forgive and forget. And God doesn't expect you and me to receive and forget. No, God's forgiveness in Christ comes at a price which God pays. All God expects from you and me is a "thank-you" in how we conduct our lives, recognize opportunities, and share whatever gifts and talents the Lord has granted us.

Absolution. Forgiveness. Another chance to serve the Lord. In the spirit of football season, a second-half, if you will.

Amen.

Morning Prayer – Pentecost 15 – September 10, 2023

Hymn 598 – Lord Christ, when first thou cam'st to earth

Lord Christ, when first thou cam'st to earth, upon a cross they bound thee,
and mocked thy saving kingship then by thorns with which they crown'd thee:
and still our wrongs may weave thee now new thorns to pierce that steady brow,
and robe of sorrow round thee.

O awful Love, which found no room in life where sin denied thee,
and, doomed to death, just bring to doom the powers which crucified thee,
till not a stone was left on stone, and all those nations' pride o'er-thrown,
went down to dust beside thee!

New advent of the love of Christ, shall we again refuse thee,
till in the night of hate and war we perish as we lose thee?
From old unfaith our souls release to seek the kingdom of thy peace,
by which alone we choose thee.

O wounded hands of Jesus, build in us thy new creation;
our pride is dust, our vaunt is stilled, we wait thy revelation:
O love that triumphs over loss, we bring our hearts before thy cross,
to finish they alavation.

BCP - Page 39 – Day of Pentecost Greeting

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

The Lord has risen indeed. Alleluia!

BCP – Pages 41 – Invitation to Confession

Dearly beloved, we have come together in the presence of Almighty God our heavenly Father, to render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands, to set forth his most worthy praise, to hear his Holy Word, and to ask, for ourselves and on behalf of others, those things that are necessary for our life and our salvation. And so that we may prepare ourselves in heart and mind to worship him, let us kneel or sit in silence, and with penitent and obedient hearts confess our sins, that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and mercy.

BCP – Pages 41-42 – Confession and Absolution

*Almighty and most merciful Father,
we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep,
we have we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts,
we have offended against thy holy laws,
we have left undone those things which we ought to have done,
and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.*

*But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us,
spare thou those who confess their faults, restore thou those who are penitent,
according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord;
And grant, O most merciful father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly,
righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.*

The almighty and merciful Lord, grant us absolution and remission of all our sins, true repentance, amendment of life, and the grace and consolation of his Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

BCP – Page 42 - Gloria

O Lord, open thou our lips.
And our mouth shall show forth thy praise.

*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.*

BCP – Pages 44-45 – Venite

O come, let us sing unto the Lord;
let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation.
Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving,
and show ourselves glad in him with psalms.
For the Lord is a great god,
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are all the corners of the earth,
and the strength of the hills is his also.

The sea is his and he made it,
and his hands prepared the dry land.
O come, let us worship and fall down
and kneel before the Lord our Maker.
For he is the Lord our God,
and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.
O worship; the Lord in the beauty of holiness;
let the whole earth stand in awe of him.
For he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth,
and with righteousness to judge the world and the peoples with his truth.

Psalm 119:33-40

First Reading – Ezekiel 33:7-11

Second Reading – Romans 13:8-14

Hymn 408 – Sing praise to God who reigns above

Sing praise to God who reigns above, the God of all creation,
the God of power, the God of love, the God of our salvation;
with healing balm my soul he fills, and every faithless murmur stills;
to God all praise and glory.

What God's almighty power hath made, his gracious mercy keepeth;
by morning glow or evening shade his watchful eye ne'er sleepeth.
Within the kingdom of his might, lo! all is just and all is right;
to God all praise and glory.

Let all who name Christ's holy Name give God all praise and glory;
let all who know his power proclaim aloud the wondrous story!
Cast each false idol from its throne, the Lord is God, and he alone:
to God all praise and glory.

Gospel – Matthew 18:15-20

Sermon – The Rev. Charles Rowins

BCP – page 53 - The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth;

*And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,*

Was crucified, dead, and buried.

He descended into hell.

The third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven.

and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father almighty.

From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

*I believe in the Holy Ghost,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

BCP – page 54 – the Lord's Prayer

The Lord be with you.

And with thy spirit.

Let us pray.

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy Name, thy kingdom come,
thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.*

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

BCP – page 55 – Suffrages A

O Lord, show thy mercy upon us;
And grant us thy salvation.

Endue thy ministers with righteousness;
And make thy chosen people joyful.

Give peace, O Lord, in all the world;
For only in thee can we live in safety.

Lord, keep this nation under thy care;
And guide us in the way of justice and truth.

Let thy way be known upon earth;
Thy saving health among all nations.

Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten;
Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.

Create in us clean hearts, O God;
And sustain us with thy Holy Spirit.

Collect for Pentecost 15

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

BCP – page 832 - Prayer for Guidance

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what thou wouldest have us to do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in thy light we may see light, and in thy straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

BCP – pages 58-59 - The General Thanksgiving

*Almighty God, Father of all mercies,
we thine unworthy servants
do give thee most humble and hearty thanks
for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all men.*

*We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life;
but above all for thine inestimable love
in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ,
for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.*

*And, we beseech thee,
give us that due sense of all thy mercies,
that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful;
and that we show forth thy praise,
not only with our lips, but in our lives,
by giving up our selves to thy service,
and by walking before thee
in holiness and righteousness all our days;*

*through Jesus Christ our Lord,
to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost,
be all honor and glory, world without end. Amen.*

Announcements

Hymn 717 - America – portions of stanzas 1 and 3

*My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing;
Long may our land be bright with freedom's holy light;
Protect us by thy might, great God, our King.*

BCP – page 59 – Prayer of St. Chrysostom

*Almighty God, who hast given us grace at this time with one accord to make our
common supplication unto thee, and hast promised through thy well-beloved Son
that when two or three are gathered together in his Name thou wilt be in the
midst of them: Fulfill now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants as may
be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to
come life everlasting. Amen.*

BCP – page 59 – The Grace

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the
Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore. *Amen.*

Hymn 540 – Awake, thou Spirit of the watchmen

Awake, thou Spirit of the watchmen who never held their peace by day or night,
contending from the walls of Zion against the foe, confiding in thy might.
Throughout the world their cry is ringing still, and bringing peoples to thy holy
will.

O Lord, now let thy fire enkindle our hearts, that everywhere its flame may go,
and spread the glory of redemption till all the world thy saving grace shall know.
O harvest Lord, look down on us and view how white the field; the laborers, how
few!

Send forth, O Lord, thy strong Evangel by many messengers, all hearts to win;
make haste to help us in our weakness; break down the realm of Satan, death,
and sin:
The circle of the earth shall then proclaim thy kingdom and the glory of thy Name.

Dismissal

Alleluia! Alleluia! Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Alleluia!

Lessons for 15th Sunday after Pentecost – September 10, 2023

Collect: Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts, for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast in your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Ezekiel 33:7-11

So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, “O wicked ones, you shall surely die,” and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life. Now you, mortal, say to the House of Israel, Thus you have said: “Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?” Say to them, “As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from you evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?”

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Psalms 119:33-40

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,
and I shall keep it to the end.
Give me understanding, and I shall keep your law,
I shall keep it with all my heart.
Make me go in the path of your commandments,
for that is my desire.
Incline my heart to your decrees
and not to unjust gain.
Turn my eyes from watching what is worthless;
give me life in your ways.
Fulfill your promise to your servant,
which you make to those who fear you.

Turn away the reproach which I dread,
because your judgments are good.
Behold, I long of your commandments;
in your righteousness preserve my life.

Second Reading: Romans 13:8-14

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word maybe confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you, by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

