

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I deeply relate today to the words of St. Paul writing to the church in Rome:

¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?
(Romans 7:15, 19, 24)

Luther understood this sentiment when he wrote that it is a comfort to hear that such a great apostle (like Paul) was involved in the same sorrows and afflictions as we are when we try to be obedient to God.

Who will rescue me, who will rescue any of us? ...will it be the god of my expectations or the God who has given His own Son to suffer and die a horrible death for the wretched man that I am? Will I be rescued because of who I think *I am* or for who God knows me to be? Is this the burden that I find myself yoked to according to this Gospel lesson today?

With all these questions that arise...what is our expectation of God? In order to find out our expectations of God, I can simply ask you to describe God. And from our description of God we would quickly find our expectations. I recently found some old notes from a Bible study I did some time ago on this Gospel text and these are the words that group used to describe God...almighty, creative, loving, gracious, elegant, powerful, and merciful. I could stop here and say, YES, this is our God and these words describe our God. But is this the only way then to describe God?

Among the wonderful words that the group used to describe God, I did not find words like, truth, savior, healer, or servant...nor did they think in terms like...victim, abused, tortured, tormented, oppressed, or sufferer. If God does not meet MY expectations, or fit into my assumptions and paradigms is there still a God? And will God rescue me from the muck and mire of our culture that influences our imaginations, our expectations, and the functions of God if they don't line up with who God really is?

I ask about our expectations of God because of the misunderstanding about Jesus at the beginning of our Gospel lesson today. To that generation within our Gospel lesson, John the Baptist was a man possessed by a demon and Jesus was a glutton and a drunk who associates with sinners. I think I can say with a great deal of confidence that our generation does not see John as a man possessed by a demon, nor is Jesus a glutton or a drunkard. However, I will say with a great deal of delight, I'm very thankful that Jesus hangs out with sinners because that only assures me that he is present now.

You may notice that our Gospel lesson then skips the woes to the cities and we jump to the part of the lesson today we probably take delight in:

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. (Matt 11:25-26)

Because we do not see John as a man possessed by a demon, nor do we see Jesus as a glutton and a drunkard, I guess we can say with pride, YES...to this passage because we get it...we get it. But do we? Is what Jesus is saying here an invitation to pride? Is this passage praise of ignorance?

We may not see Jesus or John in the way they are described here in this Gospel lesson, but perhaps the way we view God or Jesus or the way we describe them, or even use them to bolster our own righteousness can be viewed or taken in the same light that is before us in this lesson.

What I am getting at is this, it is easier for us to view God, interpret God, and even love a God that fits into my sensitivities and judgments, my expectations and descriptions, when things are going my way, or when things are pleasant and all is right within my world. But what if Jesus were to challenge our conclusions and our expectations of God the way he is here in this passage? When someone or something challenges our view or our perspective of God, what is our reaction? What happens when we cannot clearly explain God or when God does not meet our expectations?

What Jesus is challenging within this passage is our perception and our expectation of God. Jesus Christ is the revelation of God in a way that we can understand, but do we perceive Jesus in our human condition? Do we perceive God when the burden of our lives becomes heavy? Do we perceive God in the world as it is now or do we conclude that God has abandoned us?

When I think of God within the context of our human condition, I think of one of my favorite movies...the Green Mile. And I just began to read the book, which I know already will be better than the movie...but the movie still gets the point across that I am making about this Gospel lesson.

For those who are not familiar with the Green Mile by Stephen King, it is a tale set on death row in a Southern jail during the 1930s, where a convicted man possesses the mysterious power to heal people. When the lead guard recognizes the convicted man's gift, he tries to help stave off the condemned man's execution.

My point for mentioning this story is the point that I think the Gospel lesson is directing us to today. The story tells of the triumph of loving kindness in a place like death row in a prison in the 1930s, which some may conclude to be the last place one would expect to find loving kindness. In a setting such as death row, one easily concludes that condemnation is the rule of the day, but the story shows the power of loving kindness as the rule of the day.

One of the main characters, John Coffey, "like the drink only not spelled the same way", is a very large black man convicted of killing two little white girls. We learn in the story that he is not the killer but he is convicted of their murders and assumed to be a violent man that cannot be trusted. But King writes the story in a way that characterizes this man as a Christ figure.

The connections King composes are unavoidable and very obvious. Both Jesus and John Coffey are healers. Both know men's hearts. Both are killed by the state, though innocent. Both die as their executioners admit their innocence. Both must take on and carry another person's pain in

order to heal them. With Coffey, he must bear their sickness for a period of time...Christ simply bears our sins. Both are of a mistreated race for their time. Christ a first century Jew, Coffey a black during the depression. While we may not see Jesus as a glutton or a drunkard, could we image Christ as a convicted black man not to be trusted?

This is more than likely NOT the description or the expectations that a white Christian would conjure up in their imaginations. However, our expectations and our descriptions might broaden or change if we were to study the historical nature of the lineage of Jesus along with considering the geographical reality of the historical Jesus. Nonetheless, Jesus' self-revelation often shines most brightly in contexts of misunderstanding or shines in the last place or context we could imagine Jesus to shine. Through the Holy Spirit, in such moments Jesus reveals the mystery of his identity and the blessing given to those who perceive it.¹

Stephen King in an interview about this movie said that the point of the story was to show that the Spirit is alive and well even under the most difficult of circumstances...and the more difficult life becomes, the more the spirit has a chance to shine. Do we see God working in the difficult situations of our lives, or do we assume God to be punishing us or abandoning us?

Once again we hear Jesus say to us today:

²⁵ "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. (Matthew 11:25-26)

Today's Gospel is not a lesson for the church to take great pride in by claiming we get it! Nor is the lesson in praise of ignorance. Our wisdom and our intelligence are in Christ...period. Luther explains it this way:

"What, then, is the knowledge of God which is taught by Christ? Is everything taken away from us and nothing left to us? Where, then, is wisdom? Where is righteousness? Where is virtue? Not in us but in Christ. It is outside of us, in God. Thus we have been made babes, fools, sinners, liars, weaklings, and nothing since everything was given over to Christ. No one knows the Father except the Son and no one knows the Son except the Father, because everything belongs to the Father alone and has been given only to the Son. Thus we have been utterly emptied of all knowledge and thus made so altogether childlike and fit that the Father reveals to us what is His own and likewise the Son reveals to us what is his own..."²

In other words, when we think we know God and how God works it is only ourselves and our own sensitivities and judgments and our own ways that we know and not God's. We indulge ourselves by thinking we know the way, we are better, we are wiser and more intelligent, we are righteous, and we can free ourselves from the burdens of this world...free ourselves from the burdens of sin by our own works because we get it. But what we don't get is that our opinions

¹ Van Harn, Roger E. *The Lectionary Commentary Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings: Gospels*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001. The commentary based on the appointed Gospel reading for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year A Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30. In this year 2023 this passage is actually the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost. The Proper number is 9, page 68.

² *Luther's Works Volume 51, Sermons*. Edited and Translated by, Helmut W. Doberstein, General Editor, Helmut T. Lehmann. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959. "Sermon on St. Mathias Day, Matt, 11:25-30, February 24, 1517" page 28.

and expectations conquer our faith so easily and closes our eyes and our hearts to God. When we see only our own understanding, our own opinion, and our own expectations we miss God all together and we miss all God has done for us in Christ Jesus and we are left asking who will rescue us.

In Jesus Christ...God shows us the way He has emptied himself on the cross to show us the way, and we fool ourselves by thinking we know better than that way. But by emptying ourselves...by getting our self-righteousness out of the way we begin to see our need of Christ. We see then that Jesus teaches us how to be gentle, loving, forgiving, humble, and meek.

This is the yoke that we take on, the unburdened yoke that ties us with Christ. Our deeds of wisdom and intelligence do not vindicate us, what vindicates us is the burden Jesus has taken from us...our sin and our death.

When we are weary and carrying the heavy burdens of human-self-righteousness...may we look past ourselves and see that we have been rescued and there is rest for our souls in the forgiveness and salvation given to us in Jesus Christ...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.