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20th Sunday after Pentecost
October 10, 2021

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Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Alleluia!

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There's a wideness in God's mercy

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 20th Sunday after Pentecost, October 10, 2021.

Well, these are interesting lessons, aren't they? Imagine inviting a friend or neighbor to join you for church. Would these lessons make that friend or neighbor want to decline the next offer or come back?

- From **Amos**: "For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins."
- From **Hebrews**: "The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow."
- And from **Mark**: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."

Ah, but there's more to each of these lessons, isn't there?

- From Amos: "Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph."
- From Hebrews: "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."
- And from Mark: "Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'"

Today's **Psalms** summarizes the dilemma that our invited friend – and we ourselves – would face: "Return, O Lord; how long will you tarry? * Be gracious to your servants."

"Be gracious to your servants." That's our prayer isn't it? We know all about our transgressions. We commit them after all. We own them. We're responsible. And once a transgression has been committed, we can't take it back. It's out there, and it weighs heavily. Unless

And it is the “**unless**” that is the reason you and I gather. “Transgression” is not the final word. “Forgiveness” is the final word. Not “crucifixion,” but “resurrection.” Step one is troublesome, **unless** there is step two.

As you well know, I like to give names to each Sunday. “Give it your best shot Sunday” or “Start of School Sunday” for example. Now, this technique might get tiresome, so I have to be careful about when I introduce a theme. That’s why today you didn’t hear the title “Unless Sunday” at the beginning of the sermon. I had to sneak in it once the sermon began. So, welcome to “**Unless Sunday.**”

If you are like me, you don’t like to be reminded of shortcomings. Enough already. “I get it, Lord. You set a path for me, and I wander off the path. Not all the time. Not even most of the time. But enough of the time to disappoint. I don’t feel good about that, but frankly I don’t want to be reminded of that.”

Sound familiar? Yes, it probably does. But that’s not why we’re here, is it? No, we’re here, praising the Lord, because there is more to this Story. And the More, for you and me, is this fascinating historical figure named Jesus, who just might be the Savior of the World. God in human flesh. The Creator of the Universe enters our lives as the son of Mary and Joseph, and, from the moment of conception, defies conventional wisdom.

Can this be true? Well, it can’t be true **UNLESS** it is true. How’s that for logic! A little shaky? Not for you and me. And not, we hope, for friends or neighbors whom we invite to join us for worship.

When we share our faith, we should do so in humility. We should lead with what we have in common with the person with whom we are sharing. And the central trait we have in common is this really interesting behavioral mix of doing the right thing most of the time and doing the wrong thing some of the time. And isn’t it true that often the weight of the wrong thing seems heavier than the weight of the right thing?

And why is that? Why do we fret so much? Isn’t it because of high expectations? Of course. That’s it. Not only do we have high expectations of ourselves. The Creator of the Universe has high expectations as well. Not for us, but of us.

That expectation shouldn't be a burden. It should be an honor. We have a role to play that is separate from the roles of other creatures. The Creator is counting on us. And the Creator's chief reminder of this special responsibility is the Lord whom we worship. God Incarnate. One of us.

In the words of this morning's **Psalm**: "May the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us; prosper the work of our hands; prosper our handiwork." And, isn't Prosperity – that is, Fullness – what you and I feel when we are in touch with, in sync with, in line with the Creator?

In today's gospel, an individual with an impressive record – not perfect, but impressive - asks Jesus what can be done to inherit eternal life. Here's what Jesus says: "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

There is a version of this transaction for each of us. The transaction itself will vary from person to person, but what will not vary is the promise of God to be with us at all times and in all ways, with an expectation that we will honor that Divine presence with our best effort.

And, for whatever reason our best effort is not forthcoming – a transgression, if you will - we acknowledge with extreme thanks the forgiveness of God and for yet another chance to be the kind of person God wants us to be and we want to be.

Our final hymn today is all about God's mercy. It's a beautiful description of the room God gives us to get things right. And it's even more powerful when we insert the word "**Unless**" at the beginning of each line. Here is the first stanza, with God addressing the condition that we have created:

Unless - there's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea;
Unless - there's a kindness in his justice, which is more than liberty.
Unless - there is welcome for the sinner, and more graces for the good;
Unless - there is mercy with the Savior; and healing in his blood.

In summary, Step One is troublesome, **unless** there is a Step Two. You and I are here to proclaim Step Two. What a privilege. Thank you, Lord. Amen.

Hymns for Pentecost 20 – October 20, 2021

Hymn 365 – Come, thou almighty King

Come, thou almighty King, help us thy Name to sing, help us to praise.
Father whose love unknown all things created own,
build in our hearts thy throne, Ancient of Days.

Come, thou incarnate Word, by heaven and earth adored; our prayer attend:
come, and thy people bless; come, give thy word success;
stablish thy righteousness, Savior and friend.

Come, holy Comforter, thy sacred witness bear in this glad hour:
thou, who almighty art, now rule in every heart,
and ne'er from us depart, Spirit of power.

To Thee, great One in Three, the highest praises be, hence evermore;
thy sovereign majesty may we in glory see,
and to eternity love and adore.

Hymn 288 – Praise to God, immortal praise

Praise to God, immortal praise, for the love that crowns our days;
bounteous source of every joy, let thy praise our tongues employ:
all to thee, our God, we owe, source whence all our blessings flow.

All the plenty summer pours; autumn's rich o'erflowing stores;
flocks that whiten all the plain; yellow sheaves of ripened grain:
Lord, for these our souls shall raise grateful vows and solemn praise.

As thy prospering hand hath blessed, may we give thee of our best;
and by deeds of kindly love for thy mercies grateful prove;
singing thus through all our days praise to god, immortal praise.

Hymn 470 – There's a wideness in God's mercy

There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice, which is more than liberty.
There is welcome for the sinner, and more graces for the good;
there is mercy with the Savior; there is healing in his blood.

There is no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than up in heaven;
there is no place where earth's failings have such kindly judgment given.
There is plentiful redemption in the blood that has been shed;
there is joy for all the members in the sorrows of the Head.

For the love of God is broader than the measure of the mind;
and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful, we should take him at his word;
and our life would be thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord.

Lessons for 20th Sunday after Pentecost – October 10, 2021

Collect: Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

First Reading: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Seek the Lord and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it. Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground! They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

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

Psalm 90:12-17

So teach us to number our days
 that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.
Return, O Lord; how long will you tarry?
 be gracious to your servants.
Satisfy us by your loving-kindness in the morning;
 so shall we rejoice and be glad all the days of our life.
Make us glad by the measure of the days that you afflicted us
 and the years in which we suffered adversity.

Show your servants your works
and your splendor to their children.
May the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us;
prosper the work of our hands; prosper our handiwork.

Second Reading: Hebrews 4:12-16

The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

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

Gospel: Mark 10:17-31

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what your own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words.

But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly I tell you there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

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