

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 19th Sunday after Pentecost, October 8, 2021.

As some of you know, I grew up in Pasadena. Not Pasadena, Maryland, but Pasadena, California. And the house I grew up in was not far from a public junior high school. I was not old enough to go to school there yet, but I was old enough to use the athletic field on the weekend. There was no fence around the property, so access was not an issue. I could walk to the field, and did so often.

One of the neat features of an after-hours athletic field is the occasional damaged equipment like broken bats and old footballs and baseballs and sagging bamboo crossbars. I not only used this equipment at the field, I often brought the equipment home. In my simple mind, it was a win-win situation. I helped clean up the area and I took home some items that I could use either at home or back at the field. “What did you bring home today?” was a frequent dinner table question. I realized much later that, as I was cleaning up the high-jump pit at the junior high school, I was cluttering up the backyard at home.

One of my favorite activities was the high jump, or, in my case, the low jump. There was a high jump pit with standards for the bar. On the weekend, the standards were still in place, but not the crossbar, at least not the official crossbar. But I had several used, damaged crossbars at home, which I could take to the pit. There I would pretend that I was competing. Mind you, my high jump technique was primitive. I used the scissors kick – the one where you are vertical, not horizontal. And the challenging height was 2 feet, not 6 or 7 feet.

The point is simply that the notion of setting the bar high would become one of my favorite illustrations in preaching. It just makes sense to me. I can visualize how hard it is to clear a bar when the bar is set high. And I can visualize and share how wonderful it is when we are assisted in clearing a bar that on our own is too high. Clearing a really low bar is not satisfying. And never being able to clear a high bar is not satisfying. But being able to clear a challenging bar, with help of course, is really satisfying.

God sets a high bar in terms of human behavior. **Psalm 8:6** reminds us that God has made us “but little lower than the angels.” A high bar indeed, especially given that God’s expectations seem beyond our consistent means. But, if we

accept the assistance that God offers, we can do a better job. Not a perfect record of obedience to be sure, but a better record, a more satisfying record. Now, you may ask, what does this have to do with today's lessons? Well, look no further than today's gospel (**Mark 10:10**), and keep in mind that I am in my second marriage.

It's hard to hear a lesson about divorce, much less read such a lesson, and not think about knocking the crossbar off, especially after assuring myself and others that I would clear it. Of course, I am reminded that, unlike high-jumping, marriage is a two-person responsibility, not just a one-person. And, I am happy to share that, on my second attempt, thanks to a wonderful partner and, I trust, a forgiving God, I was successful.

This is probably a "too personal" introduction to the overall theme of today's lessons. That theme is captured today's **Collect**. "Pour down upon us the abundance of thy mercy, forgiving us those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ.

Here's the opening verse of today's lesson from Genesis (**Genesis 2:18**): "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." In other words, God sets in motion the whole notion of two individuals of free will sharing a life together. What could go wrong? It's tempting to confirm today's Psalm: "O Lord our Governor, how exalted is your Name in all the world."

Well, as we have come to realize, often through trial and tribulation, things can go wrong. They can go wrong at a personal level, a national level, and an international level. Getting along with one another, whether in marriage or international relations, is hard work. The bar is very high.

The most accomplished high jumpers in the world are "accomplished" through trial and error, followed by more trial and more error. As a child, it even took lots of tries to clear a two-foot bar, much less a seven-foot bar.

There's a telling verse in today's second reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews (**Hebrews 2:10**). "It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings."

Jesus is the pioneer of salvation. He accomplished his mission through suffering. And the author of this letter suggests that there will be a suffering ingredient in our journey. The author is speaking to those who responded to Jesus and then wondered whether they had made a mistake. The author says, “No, you didn’t make a mistake; you’re simply going through a version of what Jesus himself went through.”

And isn’t that what you and I are doing? We have our own challenges, our own trials, our own tests. We have committed to a high bar. And we know that, as we seek to clear that bar, we will knock that bar off time and time again.

And what keeps us at this task is the assurance that we will receive, we have received, the lift of the Lord himself. We don’t clear the bar on our own, and God doesn’t lower the bar. The bar remains high, but on this try, we are in the company of the One who can clear the bar, who has cleared the bar. What we cannot do on our own, God does for us in Christ. Hence the term from our Second Reading: “salvation perfect through sufferings.”

Our final hymn today is “I am the Bread of Life.” In this hymn, we are not the subject. We are the object. Jesus is the Bread of Life. When he says in the chorus “I will raise him up,” we are the “him.” He, Jesus, will raise you and me up. We will clear that bar because of the Risen Christ. As he was raised from the dead, you and I will be raised.

Summary: it’s a very high bar in the high-jumping pit we call life. We can try clearing that bar as a child and even as an adult, and we’ll get only so far. But with the Lord as our coach, indeed as our savior, as our lifter, we will get to where we are meant to be.

I am resurrection,
I am the life.
He who believes in me
even if he die,
he – you – we will live for ever.

Happy jumping, everybody. Though the challenge is great, we are not alone, thanks be to God. Amen.

Hymns for 19th Sunday after Pentecost – October 3, 2021

Hymn 362 – Holy, holy, holy

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee:
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty, God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee, casting down their golden crowns
around the glassy sea;
cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee, which wert, and art, and
evermore shalt be.

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide thee, though the sinful human eye
thy glory may not see,
only thou art holy; there is none beside thee, perfect in power, in love, and purity.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! All thy works shall praise thy Name,
in earth, and sky, and sea;
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty, God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.

Hymn 509 – Spirit divine, attend our prayers

Spirit divine, attend our prayers, and make this house thy home;
Descend with all thy gracious powers, O come, great Spirit, come!

Come as the light; to us reveal our emptiness and woe,
and lead us in those paths of life whereon the righteous go.

Come as the fire, and purge our hearts like sacrificial flame;
let our whole soul an offering be to our Redeemer's Name.

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Hymn 335 – I am the bread of life

I am the bread of life;
they who come to me shall not hunger;
they who believe in me shall not thirst.
No one can come to me unless the Father draw them.

And I will raise them up, and I will raise them up,
And I will raise them up on the last day.

The bread that I will give
Is my Flesh for the life of the world,
And they who eat of this bread they shall live forever,
They shall live forever.

And I will raise them up, and I will raise them up,
And I will raise them up on the last day.

Unless you eat of the Flesh
of the Son of Man and drink of his Blood,
you shall not have life within you,
you shall not have life within you.

And I will raise them up, and I will raise them up,
And I will raise them up on the last day.

Lessons for 19th Sunday after Pentecost – October 3, 2021

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

First Reading: Genesis 2:18-24

The Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at least is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

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

Psalm 8

O Lord our Governor,
how exalted is your Name in all the world!
Out of the mouths of infants and children
your majesty is praised above the heavens.

You have set up a stronghold against your adversaries,
to quell the enemy and the avenger.
When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars you have set in their courses,

What is man that you should be mindful of him!
the son of man that you should seek him out?
You have made him but little lower than the angels;
you adorn him with glory and honor;
You give him mastery over the works of your hands;
you put all things under his feet:
All sheep and oxen,
even the wild beasts of the field,
The birds of the air, the fish of the sea,
and whatsoever walks in the paths of the sea.
O Lord our Governor,
how exalted is your Name in all the world!

Second Reading: Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, subjecting all things under their feet." Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."

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

Gospel: Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

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