

*Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A / Father's Day, 19.vi.2005, 9:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania
Jeremiah 20:7-13; Psalm 69:8-20; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39
WOV Service of Word & Prayer*

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and

Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

--Matthew 10:28-31

Our Lord did not coin the phrase, ‘No good deed goes unpunished,’ but He certainly could have. As a direct consequence of His preaching and teaching and practicing of the Kingdom of Heaven—that state of human affairs in which God’s priorities of justice, mercy and kindness take precedence over all human will and desires—He was hounded by criticism, arrested on trumped up charges of sedition and sent to a cruel death by people who could have prevented it happening with a single word. But before that, He will be defamed in the crudest way. In today’s Gospel, Jesus prophesies what will come to pass later, in Matthew, Chapter 12.

There, after allowing His disciples to pick and eat grain on the Sabbath, after healing a man with a crippled hand on the Sabbath, in the Synagogue, and then, finally after healing who was mentally ill, blind and mute, Jesus is accused by the religious true believers of being the servant of *Beelzebul*, literally 'Lord of the Flies,' a.k.a., the devil. In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches His Disciples to expect such abuse in a world that cares more about rules and order than about life and the living God.

In the focus text for this sermon, Jesus also refers to the possibility of persecution unto death. In the community of Matthew's Gospel, probably in the land of Israel sometime in the 80's of our era, organized Roman state persecution of the whole Christian population had probably not begun, but there was certainly acrimony and contention within the Jewish community about those 'Nazarenes' who had helped to bring the punishment of God on the whole people through their blasphemy, making a mere man into God. That punishment was there for all to see in the ruined city of Jerusalem. The Matthean community may have suffered more from insult and ostracism than from outright physical persecution. But

they lived in the period just after the violent death of all except for perhaps one of the Twelve Apostles, and they, as we, lived their lives under the shadow of death in any case. For those ancient Jewish Christians, even natural death would also have meant a death outside the Covenant People of God as most Jews understood that. They, as we, had reason to fear death.

Jesus speaks against such fear. He does so neither by saying it will not happen nor that it will not be sorrowful and painful. Jesus' argument against our fear of death—one which will make sense only after His own death and Resurrection—is that we are never lost to God and to the love of God, *never*. We are not lost to God, even if we feel as small and inconsequential as a tiny sparrow, for the God Whose love created the sparrow is also the God who receives His creatures back in love. That love includes us, those creatures of God who are perhaps most unique in that we know about death, in that we know far too much for our own good, as the Scripture says our first parents found out to their grief and ours.

The Apostle Paul, who lived and wrote to the Church at Rome a generation before Matthew's Gospel was completed, certainly did

know organized persecution aimed at the leaders of Christianity and he wrote to a community which was located at the very center of that persecution. Paul lived every day knowing that, as he and his captors came nearer and nearer to Rome, nearer too came the day of his final reckoning with Roman justice and with his own physical death. It is in that context that Paul wrote the powerful words of today's Second Reading, powerful especially where he speaks of the connection between Jesus' own death and Resurrection and Holy Baptism. His words are reflected in the opening prayer in our Lutheran Rite of Baptism, but the text itself is only read on this Sunday and in the Burial liturgy, as the pall is placed on the coffin or urn at the beginning of the service:

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him by Baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we will certainly be united with Him in a Resurrection like His."

-- Romans 6:3-5

We are lost to God neither when we are oppressed by the high and mighty of this world, nor when our bodies are destroyed by an aggressive and uncontrollable disease. We are lost to God neither when our bodies fall victim to an accident of nature nor the when our plans, our homes and our bodies are destroyed through the scourge of war. There is an answer to the balladeer's haunting question, as Gordon Lightfoot poses it in his tribute, *'The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald'*:

*"Does anyone know
where the love of God goes
when the minutes
they turn into hours?"*

The love of God that is in Christ Jesus goes down into that deep with us, descending even to the dead, even into hell itself, to raise us up with Him, as the 'Naval Hymn' by William Whiting affirms:

*"Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bade the mighty ocean deep,
its own appointed limits keep,
O hear us when we cry to Thee,
for those in peril on the sea."*

Living in that love and apart from that fear, a fear Our Lord understands, we can be free to live in the measure we are granted by

God's grace. I received an e-mail this week from an American soldier in Iraq who serves in a place of constant danger, one of the soldiers for whom we pray each week whose unit has already suffered one fatality. Yet that soldier, who took his faith in Christ along with his love of his family and home with him into that war, could not wait to show me pictures he had taken at the site of the ancient city of Ur in Chaldea, the birthplace of Abraham. Even in the face of war, he claims his freedom to experience wonder at standing in the very place where the whole Biblical saga begins.

I have met soldiers of another sort this week as well, just as courageous and just as free through their faith in God's love in the face of illness that threatens to destroy body, mind or both, but still determined to fight with every resource of medicine and strength God gives them to affirm life in the face of sickness and death. They know, as they count their blessings in gratitude to God, that they are not lost sight of, not for a minute, not for a second, not for a single instant. They understand that wholeness, health which will not again deteriorate, depends on our connection with God and God's love which we are offered in all the seasons of our lives by grace.

As I hope you are able to hear this Word today, I invite you to return to this Gospel text and to what Saint Paul teaches in Romans throughout this week as you or those around you may feel forgotten by God or left behind by life, and I invite you to remember your Baptism in which you were and are joined to the death of Jesus, Who overcame *everything* that may threaten us through His death and rising from the dead. God bless you as you 'soldier on' by faith in His love. ✠Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✠Amen.

S. D. G. !