



GPS GUIDE: OCTOBER 24, 2021

Grow. Pray. Study

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon: Safe Harbor

A selection from Acts 27

When it was determined that we were to sail to Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were placed in the custody of a centurion; they boarded a ship from that was about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia. So, we put out to sea, but the sailing was slow and difficult. They used the island of Cyprus to shelter from the headwinds, until they came to a place called Good Harbors.

But much time was lost, and the voyage was now dangerous. Paul warned them, “Men, I see that our voyage will suffer damage and great loss, not only for the cargo and ship but also for our lives.” But since the harbor was unsuitable for spending the winter, they put out to sea hoping they might find a good place to take refuge for the winter.

Before long, a hurricane-strength wind swept down. The ship was caught in the storm and couldn’t be turned, so they gave in to it, and it carried the boat along. They were so battered by the violent storm that the next day the men began throwing cargo overboard. On the third day, they picked up the ship’s gear and hurled it into the sea. When neither the sun nor the moon appeared for many days and the raging storm continued to pound, all hope of being saved from this peril faded.

Monday: Read Mark 12: 41-44

In biblical times, widows were at the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder. In a world where a woman’s status was tied to her father or husband, a widow was left with little opportunity for protection or provision. As a result, widows were usually poor, marginalized, and vulnerable to be used and abused by the more powerful in society. So, it is not an incidental detail that scripture tells the story of a widow, a woman of faith upon whose generosity the biblical story advances. Here in Mark’s Gospel, as the clock was winding down during Holy Week, while Jesus was watching people drop their offerings for the provision of the Temple, he pointed out the remarkable faith and generosity of an unnamed widow who waited patiently in line among the wealthier donors. When her time came, she dropped in two small copper coins, worth very little compared to the larger gifts offered by most of the others in that line. As far as we know, she did not even know Jesus was watching her. But Jesus knew that those two coins represented her entire net worth. It was all the money she had. We don’t know her story. We don’t even know her name. But you can be sure there is a story there. Behind every great act of generosity is a story, even if only known to the giver and to God. Well, Jesus noticed (Sobering thought, isn’t it, that Jesus might always be watching the offering?). Jesus said that her gift was the largest one given, because, says Allen Walworth, “The way God does accounting is not by counting the number of dollars in the offering plate, but by comparing one’s gift to the dollars still in one’s wallet or portfolio.” What inspired that widow to drop her first coin, much less her second coin? As Jesus said, “she gave her very life.” It was the same thing Jesus would do later that week on the cross.

It is often said that Jesus sacrificed for our sakes. Is sacrificial giving something you have considered only as a recipient? What would it look like if you practiced sacrificial giving? How can you take one step toward a more generous practice of stewardship?

Prayer: As a faithful response to your sacrificial giving in my life, O Lord, I pledge myself to live more generously. Amen.

Tuesday: Read Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-10 and Matthew 5: 38-48

From the biblical perspective, holiness is really a matter of integrity. Our Scripture readings for today present integrity as a matter of imitating the character of God. The sum of what it means to be right and do right is, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” This may sound like an outrageous demand. When we turn to Matthew’s reading, it seems Jesus demands no less of us: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.” Who can possibly fulfill that? Who can possibly imitate the character of God? But take a closer look. In both readings we find that integrity is not a matter of living up to some rigid arbitrary system of rules. It’s not a matter of how well we practice our piety. It is found in how we treat those around us. It’s a matter of practicing the compassion and mercy of God in our relationships with those around us, a matter of “loving your neighbor as yourself” in very practical ways. Integrity is what happens when our lives are *integrated*—when who we are and what we do match. Integrity is what happens when what we believe translates into how we live. Integrity is what happens when all of living flows from the very core of our being. That’s how we imitate God’s character. That’s how we live out God’s generous and unrestricted grace and mercy and love in our relationships with those around us. That’s how we translate “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” into a way of life. What do you find most challenging in these passages? When you examine your beliefs and your practices, do they match? Are they integrated? Where do you find room for growth?

Prayer: Lord, I want to follow you more closely. May my life be truly integrated so that what I say I believe and how I act toward others are in accord. Amen.

Wednesday: Read Luke 22: 7-30 and John 13:1-20

Authentic worship, which praises and glorifies God rather than consoles and affirms ourselves helps us learn to live into the upside-down ways of God. Each time we worship we hear the story of a God who is passionate about justice to the poor, vigilant in concern for those who are vulnerable, and fiercely protective of the least and the lost. God’s banquet, the act of sharing in communion, connects us to all the biblical scenes of feeding, welcoming, sheltering, and caring - scenes that vividly reveal *who God is* and *who we are called to be*. It reminds us that everything we possess is a gift, and this should make us both grateful to God and generous to one another. In the household of God, we are not owners. We are stewards. We are people entrusted to do good with whatever we have, especially to those strangers who are most in need. How can worship train us in gratitude and generosity? What are the main obstacles to such worship in our culture? In what ways does your time at the Lord’s Table help you to know who and whose you are? How does it help you understand your call to serve others? Share with others? Give sacrificially?

Prayer: In my call to be a steward of the faith, help me to serve others, share with open arms, and give of myself, that all the glory might be yours, O God. Amen.

Thursday: Read John 1:1-18 and John 3:16

Jason Coker says that true generosity - where the giver expects nothing in return from the recipient – “is both a guiding characteristic of God and a distinguishing mark of God’s reign.” And it is subversive. For any community that practices such generosity must step away from the ways of the surrounding culture. Scripture is filled with God’s radical generosity, but it is most unmistakable in the gift of God’s son. To embrace God’s reign through Jesus Christ is to welcome this divine generosity. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “But first seek God’s

reign and its justice, and all these things *will be given* to you as well.” Jesus displayed extravagant generosity through his life and death, and he explicitly taught it to his followers. As the disciples embraced Jesus’ way, they shared resources with one another. In doing so they subverted Roman social practices which showed partiality to the wealthy and stoked the desire to keep one’s possessions for oneself. The generosity of God’s reign is still subversive today. Such generosity turns cultural consumerism on its head. Consumerism promotes retail therapy, the idea that we can buy our way to happiness. This ‘therapy’ is based on *receiving* rather than *giving*, and thus stands in opposition to the New Testament concept of sharing resources. Christian generosity is grounded in God’s gracious act in the birth, death, and resurrection of God’s son, which is the height of sacrificial self-giving. Who in your life has offered you true, sacrificial generosity? How does God’s sacrificial generosity inform your understanding of how to live in God’s ways?

Prayer: God, generosity is difficult because it runs counter to our culture of consuming. Transform me so that my first instinct is to share with others what has been so freely given to me. Amen.

Friday: Read Luke 14: 1-14 and Hebrews 13:2

Jesus wasn’t known for his politeness around food. Though the Gospels record him receiving and accepting many dinner invitations during the years of his ministry, those mealtime scenes usually ended in drama, provocation, or scandal. Once, a woman of dubious reputation caressed his feet under the table. Sometimes he interrupted a meal to heal sick people on the Sabbath. Often, he ate with dirty hands and shared a table with riff-raff. Worst of all - he *said* things. Blunt, embarrassing things that no one cared to hear. Today’s reading describes such a scene. Jesus is invited for a Sabbath meal by a leader of the Pharisees. Arriving early, he sits and watches as his fellow guests scramble for places of honor around the table. After observing their drama for a while, Jesus calls them out with a parable. Knowing full well the social rules of his day, he shuns them and calls instead for a revolution. Not a revolution of arms and bloodshed, but a revolution in table manners. Our reading doesn’t tell us how Jesus’s listeners reacted. All I know is how I react as I read this story. I feel an uncomfortable combination of surprise, skepticism, and fear. As in: Really? Is Jesus serious? Does he have any idea what he’s asking? It appears he does. Every once in a while, just as I’m growing comfortable with my faith, a story like this one comes along to shatter my complacency. Don’t exalt myself? Don’t insist on the recognition I deserve? Ignore the pecking order - or worse - upend it? Don’t network or schmooze? Open my heart and home to people who can do nothing for me? People I have no affinity for? People I can’t impress, earn favors from, or show off to my competition? Why on earth should I do that? Because Jesus insists on it! Because *this is who God is*, the Great Reverser of our priorities, our hierarchies, and our values. Because God knows that our anxious scramble for greatness will lead to nothing but more anxiety, more suspicion, more loneliness, more hatred, and more devastation. Because God’s kingdom is the place where all are already welcome, already loved, already cherished. Because the currency of that kingdom is humility, not arrogance; generosity, not stinginess; hospitality, not fear. When we dare to gather at Jesus’s table, we are actively protesting the culture of upward mobility and competitiveness that surrounds us. There’s nothing easy or straightforward about this; it requires hard work over a long period of time. Jesus asks us to believe that our behavior at the table matters — because it does. Where we sit speaks volumes, and the people whom we choose to welcome reveals the stuff of our souls. This is God’s world we live in; nothing here is ordinary. In this realm, the strangers at our doorstep are the angels. What about this parable is most challenging to you? What parts of your faith are too comfortable? Who does God already love and cherish that we need to extend an invitation to?

Prayer: Holy God, help us to live in humility, generosity, and hospitality as we live out our core value of extending love and respect to all. Amen.

Saturday: Read Luke 10:25-37

The parable of the Good Samaritan, depicted below, by the Italian painter Jacopo Bassano, beautifully illustrates generosity and support of one person for another devoid of prejudice. The artist chose this theme in order to take the church of his day to task for failing in its obligations to care for the sick and needy in the society. Most of us learn the parable of the Good Samaritan from a young age. It is a gem of masterful storytelling suitable for children. But when we rehear the parable as adults, fully aware of the ongoing conflicts in our culture, the events in the story become more complicated. Bassano recreates the moment that the Samaritan lifts the traveler who was stripped and beaten by robbers and prepares to put him on his donkey. The animal is visible on the right side of the painting. To the right of the Samaritan's foot are the flasks from which oil and wine were poured on the traveler's wounds. The body of the traveler is positioned on an elevated rock that enables the Samaritan to get behind him to hold him up. The bandages, applied earlier by the Samaritan, are already red with blood that has soaked into them. Two others are visible leaving the scene on the left side of the painting. The distant city is the artist's home town of Bassano. Jacopo Bassano was a simple man by the standards of his contemporaries. He assisted the efforts of relief for the sick and poor in his day. He encouraged a generous and genuine rapport between people. Like his life, his artwork reflects the ethical emphasis of Christ's parable and is an inspirational model for the Church's mission today. When you study the painting what stands out to you? What would an artist rendering of this story look like if it was set in our city today? How does art help us envision our call to live in compassion and cross boundaries with the gospel?

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for teaching me that sacrificial generosity is a virtue I should live out with my actions toward others. Amen.



Jacopo Bassano (1510-1592), *The Good Samaritan* (c. 1557). Oil on canvas, 40 x 31 1/4". National Gallery, London, UK. Photo: © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY.