

19th Sunday after Pentecost
October 15, 2017
Exodus 32:1-14 / Philippians 4:1-9
The Rev. Carenda Baker

For this month of Sundays in October through November 5th, All Saints Sunday, we are invited to shine the spotlight on the direction in which we have oriented our lives – toward God’s way or toward pathways of our own making.

To be human is to be attached to something or someone. It is our bane and blessing. It is both a gift and challenge that there are so many directions in which we can orient our lives, so many possibilities each day for how we invest our heart, mind, and strength. Our time, talent, and treasure.

I had one of those spotlight “aha” moments this week. I had my “to do” list mapped out and in hand for Thursday: stop in at the free breakfast – chat with guests and Trinity servers, finish up details before I go on vacation tomorrow, and at least start writing today’s sermon because most of Friday and Saturday would be spent at Diocesan Convention in Hershey. I am not ashamed to admit that I am still learning to hold my plans for each day very lightly, with open hands. I can be very driven and focused, task-oriented, and perfectionistic – which is sometimes a good and necessary thing. But not always. I keep learning that the human “interruptions” *ARE* the ministry, the dynamic place where God most often shows up. I know this happens for you, too, because you tell me about your experiences. Whether it involves cats or kids, stranger or spouse, illness, healing, or an unexpected chance encounter, God comes knocking. It happened again for me on Thursday.

I was about to start writing today’s sermon, when Peggy knocked on the office door and said, “There’s a woman here who needs to speak to you”. It is only by God’s grace that I’m learning to pay attention, because I know it’s God who has come calling. It will be Christ standing there, often in some distressing disguise.

Peggy ushered into the office a woman whom I’d never met before. She was thin and smelled strongly of cigarette smoke. Her head was held down, and she spoke so softly that I had to lean in closer to understand what she was saying. She didn’t make much eye contact. I almost catch her name as she introduces herself, speaking with a southern drawl. We sit down and after every two or three brief sentences she takes a deep labored breath before she continues speaking.

She is currently homeless, slept the night before in a shed. She has numerous health problems and is concerned that with the damp weather she could get pneumonia. She needs some help, somewhere to stay until Nov. 3rd when she gets her monthly check. Her plan then is to live in a local motel, paying to live there by the month. She is in an emotionally and physically abusive relationship and wants to get away from her partner. She waited until he was asleep to take the cell phone and leave. She can’t go to the

library to be indoors, because he will come looking for her there. She looks worn out, beaten down by life, and yet there is a gentleness, an attitude of caring about her.

Yes, she needs something to eat. A safe, warm place to stay where she can get some uninterrupted sleep. I don't give out cash to folks who come asking for assistance. Usually, it's a Giant gift card to be used for food or gas, or sometimes it's a modest check made out to a landlord, or debit card charge to pay for a few nights' stay at a motel.

I pick up the directory of local resources and turn to the number for Women in Need. I sit across from her as she makes the phone call and speaks to someone there, telling bits of her story to yet another stranger. The case manager will get back to her in three days. The WIN worker gives her another number to call where she might be able to get emergency shelter. She calls that number and is told the person will need to get back to her. It will have to be "waiting mode" for awhile. We go to the parish hall to find her something to eat – a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, tangerine, a granola bar and some lemonade to drink. She picks out a few clothes to take with her. We drive to a local motel and arrange for a few nights stay. I give her the last \$25 Giant gift card I have on hand. Before I leave, she asks me if I will pray with her. It's not an uncommon request when these neighbors come asking for whatever it is they need. When we've finished praying together, she looks at me and says, "That was the best part." I give her a business card with the church's phone and address, and my cell phone number. We share a strong heartfelt hug, and go on about our days. She tells me that God is going to bless me. God just did.

Yes – God in distressing disguise has come knocking at the office door, at my heart's door. By the grace of God and the Spirit's leading, my heart in this particular encounter was oriented toward God and toward my neighbor. My "to do" list and whatever else I thought was important could wait.

Life is precious. Life is difficult. Life is full of things that cause us anxiety, no matter how rich or poor, healthy or ill, educated or uneducated, connected or alone we are. As human beings, we share this truth that life is difficult and full of angst because we are not in control of everything that happens. This is exactly the situation where the children of Israel find themselves in today's story from Exodus. Whether or not they are conscious of what they are doing, the people are anxious and need reassurance, something tangible to touch and see to remind them that they have not been abandoned, not just delivered from Egypt to die out there in no-man's land. Moses, God's leader has gone off up the mountain, has been gone now for a long time. They've probably stopped counting how many days it's been since he left. They don't know if he is coming back, but it looks less and less likely. It's not been that long since they left Egypt on this wilderness pilgrimage with no map, no written instructions. This journey toward freedom, toward God's promise of a new rich homeland is hard. It is a trust walk, every step of the way. And now God's stand in guy, God's chosen leader Moses has left them.

They turn to the second in command, Moses' brother Aaron. "Come on, Aaron. Don't just stand there – do something! Make a god who will lead us. That Moses, the man who got us out of Egypt – who knows what's happened to him?"

The people have lost faith in Moses, and so too, have lost faith in God. They are suffering a failure of trust. And yet they still need something to worship. Nature abhors a vacuum. Everybody worships something. The God who delivered them is too abstract and distant, so it seems, and is not tangible enough to satisfy their need for a concrete object, something to worship. Their anxiety has taken over yet again – even though the waters had miraculously parted for them and swallowed up Pharaoh's chariots, and manna and water had been provided when they needed them most, in spite of their grumbling and complaining. And their leader Moses, seems to walk with God, seems to speak God's word to them. And speaks to God on their behalf.

We are a lot like them, our ancient ancestors in the faith. We do it too - reach out to calm our anxieties by trying to take the future into our own hands, looking for something else more tangible to attach ourselves to. An endless array of things is available and will suffice to calm our anxieties, or so we think. Food or alcohol. Money and power. Drugs, work, entertainment. Sex, stuff, success. It takes very little to disorient us from God's way, to steer us so that we veer off the trust path, to create our own way and our own false deliverers, our little "g" gods. It's so much easier to worship, to give ourselves to something tangible than to give our hearts in trust to a Creator, a higher Power that we cannot see or prove exists. Two of the biggest life questions we face are these: First - Is there One greater than us who is benevolent – who is truly good and cares about us? And second - Is this Holy Other One powerful enough to protect us?

"Gods" of our own making may satisfy temporarily. But in the long run, they can't be counted on always to be good or to protect us completely from distress, disaster, or death. In fact, worshiping anything created, rather than the Creator, leads us from life - to separation and death. The truth is, we grow in the image of the gods we worship.

So how do we know when we're flirting with idolatry, being tempted to displace and replace God the Creator with something lesser, something we can manipulate and control? A helpful place to start is to begin by asking ourselves each day: did my particular attachments today draw me closer to God, or did they hinder deeper intimacy with God, and the ability to love and serve my neighbor? Do my attachments help me take another step toward God on that long trust walk, or today did they lead me away from God and God's love, forgiveness, and care?

We can engage in this practice of daily self-reflection about our attachments and our actions. In his letter to the Christians of the church in Philippi, the apostle Paul offers another practice, what amounts to a primer for spiritual growth. It describes the pathway to worshiping the one, holy and living God. *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. . . . Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."* Gratitude, intercession, praise, and joy orient our lives to the Holy One. Our faith is nurtured and shaped by living affirmatively. In a world characterized by polarization, negativity, and

scarcity thinking, Paul advises his listeners and us to live affirmatively. And this letter was written while Paul is in prison. He directs us to fill our minds with and meditate on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, and gracious. The best, not the worst. The beautiful, not the ugly. Things to praise, not things that diminish or curse. Focusing on the affirmative and the good awakens us to God's movement in our lives. The Philippians, like the church today – like us – face the reality of limitation and scarcity, but they and we need not be spiritually stunted by our limitations.

Following his counsel to “think on these things”, the positive and affirming aspects of life, Paul makes two bold affirmations: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” and “My God will supply all my needs.” Connected with God, acknowledging our dependence upon God's grace, God continues to promise new energy, new possibilities, new life. Not easy or pain-free life, but lively, adventurous, meaningful and connected life. Orienting and being re-oriented to God's way, the way of the long trust walk, is the work of grace. Psychiatrist and spiritual director Gerald May writes in his book Addiction and Grace: “Grace is much more than a static possibility of love. It is an outpouring, a boundless burning offering of God's self to us, suffering with us, overflowing with tenderness. Grace is God's passion. . . . God's primary request is “Love me”.

Love and trust – trust and love - these are the two hands of faith. These hands do not promise a life free of disappointment or pain, a life without doubt, setbacks, or failure. But they do hold out to us grace, God's passion to be for us, and with us. And friends, just like my visitor said after we prayed on Thursday, “That is the best part”. Grace.

“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.” Amen.