

Friday, August 21

Reading: Genesis 45:4-5 *Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, who you sold into Egypt. And do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life."*

Thought: God turns all things to good – Joseph knew this and wanted his brothers to understand that as well. So often we continue to feel guilty about something after we have been forgiven. An illustration of this is of a woman who broke a glass at a friend's house. She apologized and replaced the glass. Her friend forgave her, even saying she didn't have to replace the glass. But the woman continued to feel guilty, and as a result was uncomfortable around her friend and ended their relationship. We must be careful that we don't fall into this trap – especially when we have asked God to forgive us, for God not only forgives everything, God uses even our mistakes and sin for good. Is there something you have done that you feel guilty about, confessed and not completely accepted forgiveness for? Have you experienced God taking something intended for bad and using it for good?

Prayer: Gracious God – you forgive everything. Help me to receive your forgiveness and to find the ways you use everything for good.

Saturday, August 22

Reading: Psalm 133:1 *"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!"*

Thought: When I read this, I am reminded of a time I was in a car with 4 men who were all pastors in various churches. I had an epiphany – these were the brothers I never had before! We are children of God and therefore kindred and it IS good when we live together in unity. This does not mean we never disagree – it means we come to an understanding and support each other. September is a time to start up new activities and resume old ones. We at Southwood are looking to continue our revitalization, both as individuals and as a congregation. We all have differing spiritual desires and needs. Finding activities and projects that will meet those can be difficult, but if we respect each other and truly seek God's will for our church, I am confident we will be successful. What do you think is lacking in your spiritual life and the life of your church? What projects or activities would you support to address that spiritual lack?

Prayer: Holy Spirit – guide our church as we prepare a new season of learning and growing in faith.

Sunday August 23

Reading: Isaiah 56:1 *"Maintain justice and do what is right"*

Thought: This is a pretty short and pithy piece of advice, one that can have many interpretations because justice and doing right can mean many things. It can mean gender equality in the workplace. It can mean prison sentences appropriate to crimes. It can mean respecting another's place in line when we are waiting. It can mean welcoming refugees. It can mean being polite and respectful even when we are tired or confronting someone. It would be easier if Isaiah had given us a list of what God calls just and right. Broad statements like this call us to search out for ourselves what is just and right, seeking the wisdom of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. How do you "do right"? What does justice mean to you?

Prayer: God - help me to maintain your justice and do what is right in your eyes.

Monday, August 24

Reading: Isaiah 56:7 *"...for my house shall be a house of prayer for all nations"*

Thought: Jesus quoted this verse from Isaiah, which is also found in Jeremiah 7:11, while he was clearing the temple. Commentaries indicate that Jesus was speaking against two practises – monetizing the worship of God and that the market was set up in the court of the Gentiles, which was the only space outsiders were allowed to enter, effectively preventing outsiders an opportunity to engage with God. Our society is built on business, and it can be a temptation to put the finances of our church ahead of its true purpose. Providing low-cost rental space to charities, non-profits and support groups as a way to serve our community and God, has contributed to our financial security and helped our church survive. However, survival is not enough. Yes, a church needs money to function, but the purpose of a church is not to be profitable, but to worship and serve God. The council at Southwood is aware of this. We are committed to seeking a vibrant and healthy church. What do you think is the purpose of our congregation? What steps should we take to achieve that purpose?

Prayer: Jesus – you call and remind us of what is truly important. Help us to remember that always and to maintain your house as a place of worship, service, and prayer.

Tuesday, August 25

Reading: Romans 11:29 *For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable"*

Thought: It is rather dangerous to "cherry pick" scripture, that is, to quote a verse out of context, but I think it is alright in this case because in itself, it states a truth. Gifts given by God can not be removed or changed. They can be ignored, unrecognized or unappreciated, but no matter what, they are still there. We may think we have a good reason to ignore our gifts or avoid using them. Perhaps we think they are not really gifts, or that someone else has a better gift. Perhaps you think that if you use your gift you will be somehow misunderstood, mistreated or that you will end up spending too much time and effort by offering to use your gifts in service. No matter what, those gifts are there and will always be calling you to use them. That call is of the Holy Spirit, and the result of answering that call can and will be truly satisfying. What do you think are your God-given gifts? Are you ignoring or avoiding using them?

Prayer: Heavenly Father – thank you for the gifts you have given me. Help me to recognize them and to use them as you intend.

Wednesday, August 26

Reading: Matthew 15:18-20 *"What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart comes evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."*

Thought: This verse is often used to illustrate that we must do more than follow rules to be made righteous. It tells us corruption, and righteousness, have their origins deep inside, and it is expressed by what we say and do. I am in an online group that read the book "I Told Me So"

by Gregg A. Ten Elshof . One of the key concepts of this book was that we all have a tendency to internally make excuses for doing wrong. We tell ourselves, “it doesn’t really matter” or “next time I will be better” or “other people do that, why can’t I?” or “nobody will notice” – the list goes on and on. As I read this verse, I realize I don’t need to work so much about thinking before I speak. What I need to do is work on focussing and remembering the truth that God has placed in my heart. If my heart was truly focussed on and reflecting God and the character of Jesus, I wouldn’t have to think about what I was saying. A heart full of goodness will always express that goodness in word and action. What are your spiritual hopes? What is your heart full of?

Prayer: Jesus – I want my heart to be aligned with yours. Be with me, soften my heart to be filled with good things and intentions and to remain true to those.

Thursday, August 27

Reading: Matthew 15:25-28 *she came to him and knelt before him, saying “Lord, help me.” Jesus answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” She replied, “Yes, Lord yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment.*

Thought: What audacity this woman had! Knowing full well that Jesus had great power – she knew Jesus could work miracles. But she was a woman, and women in Jesus’ time were expected to be subservient to men. In addition, she was a Caananite, not Jewish, so had no right to expect Jesus to take any notice of her. It is amazing that she had the boldness to even speak to Jesus, let alone contradict him and call him to task. It is remarkable that Jesus commended her for challenging him. Think about what this means to you. To me, this verse made me realize how wonderful it is that the God I worship and serve is a God that allows me to question, and doesn’t demand unthinking, immediate, and perfect submission. We have been given the ability to address God boldly and with audacity, knowing that God will see our intentions and reward or forgive us as is appropriate. Have you ever challenged God? What happened?

Prayer: All-powerful God – I am grateful for your patience and tolerance of me as well as for your guidance and forgiveness.