

9th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 6:9-22; 7:24; 8:14-19; Psalm 46; Matthew 7:21-29; Romans 1:16-17; 3:22b-31

This is the 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time. But how can it be the 9th Sunday? Didn't Ordinary Time just begin last Sunday, and should that not make this the 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time? Not really. The first season of Ordinary Time is actually between the observance of Epiphany and Ash Wednesday. The time between Epiphany (which is on January 6 of each year) and Ash Wednesday (which is the Wednesday before the first Sunday in Lent) is a season of Ordinary Time. Some liturgists prefer to call that period Epiphany Season (as I do, in order to keep us centered on the story of Jesus) and others call it Ordinary Time. In liturgical circles, it is called both, according to personal preference. Of course, the beginning of Lent is determined by the date of Easter in a given year. Therefore, the number of Sundays between Epiphany Day and Ash Wednesday fluctuate. So, for example, if Easter is on April 11 in a given year, then Ash Wednesday would have to be on February 24. Consequently, that would make seven Sundays between January 6 and February 24 (including Epiphany Sunday itself). That, in turn, makes May 30 (Trinity Sunday) the 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time. And that, consequently, makes this Sunday the 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time!

Genesis 6:9-22; 7:24; 8:14-19 are the highlights of one of the stories about Noah's Flood. Although the flood narrative appears as one story in Genesis, it is textually clear that there are two stories that have been very artfully integrated into a single account. But the editor, in combining the two stories, destroyed precious little of either story so that one can trace the story line of both stories. Biblical scholars know that there are two stories because of very obvious internal contradictions. One of those contradictions is the number of animals brought into the ark (one story has it as seven clean and two unclean animals and birds [7:2-3]; the other story as two of each kind [6:19-20]). A second is the length of the flood (one story has it as 40 days [7:4, 12, 17], the other as more than a year – i.e., 12 months and 10 days [8:3-14]). A third contradiction is the nature of the flood (one story indicates it's a massive rain storm that brings about flooding [7:12-17; 8:6], the other as the disintegration of the dome separating the waters above the earth and the waters below the earth [7:11]). Finally, the names of God are different in the two accounts, with one story using God's formal given name [Yahweh – 6:5-8] while the other exclusively uses God's generic name [God – 6:11-12]. Our Old Testament lesson for today is a summary of the second story only.

There is no story in the Bible that captures the imagination and interest (and perhaps the dread of chaos) as does the story of Noah and the Flood. It not only captivated the Jews for 3,000 years and us, today (witness the number of stories on the History channel and National Geographic on the flood), but it captivated much of the ancient world, as well.

The flood story of the Hebrews shared a flood tradition among most ancient Near East societies, as well as other cultures around the world. The *Epic of Atrahasis* and the *Tablets of Sumar* both tell flood stories. The best known, of course, was the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which tells the story of Utnapishtim (rather than Noah) in which this flood hero is delivered from an impending universal catastrophe. All these stories predate the biblical flood story by close to 1,000 years. Therefore, an overwhelming, culture-destroying flood is part of the traditions of many ancient Near East societies. One can speculate that such a universal story likely had its origins in an

actual flood of biblical proportions, and possibilities have been suggested such as the Persian Gulf flooding a large coastland area, or the waters of the northeast extension of the Mediterranean breaching the Bosphorus Isthmus and inundating the Black Sea (both of which have clear archaeological evidence for their occurrence). Either of these catastrophes would be sufficient to leave an indelible impression on its survivors.

But the flood story of the Bible is profoundly different than the other Near East stories in one way. All the others are essentially adventure stories, telling of the fortune or misfortune of its hero. The biblical account, on the other hand, is a morality play. It deals with God's intervention in a world that has departed thoroughly from God's intention realized by God's act of creation. Humanity is destroyed because of their refusal to act justly, to love each other tenderly and to walk humbly with their God. Further, this story tells of the salvation of one family from the waters of punishment in order to beget a new race of humanity. It is a story of God's call to and selection of one man and his family, and of that man's obedient response to that call. Therefore, the biblical story is a morality tale rather than an adventure story!

The story begins by introducing its protagonist. "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God" (6:9). It is significant that Noah is introduced as "a righteous man, blameless in his generation" and that he "walked with God". Only two others in the book of Genesis are called "righteous" – Enoch who was so in relationship with God that he did not die but was translated into heaven (5:24) and Abram/Abraham (17:1), the progenitor of Israel. The Hebrew word translated "righteous" (*tseqeh*) can equally be translated "just", because the word has about it not the sense of moral fastidiousness but rather of acting justly, equitably and compassionately towards humanity and of being in a covenantal relationship with God. The implication of the word is that one is living in obedience to God's call and thus is following God's moral standards in one's commitment to humanity.

The author then introduces the story's antagonist – in this case, not an individual but all of humanity. "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth" (6:11-12). The words used in this description of humanity's corruption are particularly intriguing. The Hebrew word that is translated "violence" (*hamas*) doesn't so much mean "extreme force" or "vehement behavior", but rather means "lawlessness" or "illegal behavior". It means repeated intentional disobedience or ignoring of the laws that govern the behavior of people toward one another.

This is the first of a number of references in the flood narrative to the breaking of the covenant between God and humanity that occurred at the creation of humanity as "made in the image of God" in Genesis 1:27. The author is saying that God created humanity with clear-cut intentions both for humanity and for the world over which humanity was to "have dominion" (1:26), to cultivate and to nurture (2:15). Instead, humanity chose to reject relationship with God and this broke relationship with the remainder of humanity and with creation itself (Genesis 3). Now, that obsession to dominate everything rather than to partner with God in maintaining the earth had led to humanity thoroughly alienated from each other and the world around them, lusting for power, acting unjustly, seeking to exploit one another and the earth and rejecting a loving

relationship with God and each other. Humanity was now thoroughly *hamas*, “lawless” and thus was totally “corrupt in God’s sight”.

The Hebrew word translated “in (God’s) sight” or “in the view (of God)” (*lipne*) is particularly poignant. It literally means “to the face of”, but it doesn’t mean “in front of” (i.e., a spatial term) or “before” (a temporal term). Instead it has a symbolic meaning, much as does the English expression “losing face” (i.e., one doesn’t actually misplace one’s face by “losing face” but rather loses credibility or status). The term instead focuses upon the person about whom it is spoken (in this case, God), indicating that this person must act in judgment out of a sense of obligation to maintain the right but with the deepest pain at having to so act. Thus, by saying that “the earth (i.e., humanity) was corrupt in God’s sight”, the text is saying that God, as the final arbiter of just behavior, is aware of the corrupting behavior of humanity and must act. But God will act with a broken heart, for he must act to bring judgment upon those made in God’s very image!

The stage is now set. The protagonist (Noah) has been introduced as “righteous” and “just” before God and humanity, faithfully obeying the task given to all humanity at its creation. The antagonist (humanity) has also been introduced as “corrupt” and “lawless”, continually breaking covenant with God, acting unjustly and greedily toward humanity, and corrupting the earth itself. Now, God must act to bring judgment upon that humanity, and yet to seek its redemption through Noah. How will God do it?

“And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence (*hamas* or “lawlessness”) because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark” (6:13-14a)! And the saga begins!

The ark ordered by God is immense for a ship of ancient times. It was extremely seaworthy, 440 x 73 x 44 feet, a vessel of about 43,000 tons, about the size of a modern battleship. Intriguingly, the vessel in the Gilgamesh Epic is a highly unstable 180-foot cube with about four times the volume of the biblical ark but which would have been violently tumbled by the waves. The biblically-stated dimensions of the ark would create an extremely stable craft that would have smoothly ridden the waves, no matter how chaotic they might be.

God’s instructions to Noah are threefold. First, he is to build the ark to the specifications God gives to him (6:14-16). Second, he is to gather “your sons, your wife, your son’s wives and two of every kind of living thing into the ark” (6:19-21), awaiting “a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life” (6:17).

Third, in this ark, Noah, his family and the innocent beasts of the earth will ride out the flood, and will become the progenitors of a new world. Their survival will be the indication that “I will establish my covenant with you” (6:18a), “that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth” (9:11, 13).

The promise of a covenant with Noah is of particular importance. A covenant in the ancient Near East was a solemn agreement between two parties to abide by the agreement made and

stipulating the sanctions that would occur if either party broke agreement (if the covenant was broken, the aggrieved party had the right to kill either the other party or a relative of the other party). There was no legal relationship of greater importance and solemnity than a covenant. In fact, the Hebrew word for covenant, "*berith*" means "to cut", to stress the idea that the agreement struck between the two was so binding that it would be as if it were physically carved in their respective palms so that they could not forget it (e.g., Isaiah 49:16).

What is particularly significant about this scripture is that Genesis 6:18 is both the first occurrence of God's establishment of a covenant in the Bible and the introduction of the practice of covenant as the primary vehicle by which God's grace will be transpired from God to humanity. Noah's salvation from the waters of the flood through God's provision of an ark is the first example of God's grace and mercy. But the covenant, like any covenant, required action on the part of both parties: God would rescue, but Noah had to be obedient to the heavenly vision and to build the ark! This was the agreement the two had "cut" between them!

God's covenant with Noah was the first of many covenants by which God progressively revealed to humanity God's redemptive and society-transforming work. It would be followed by covenants made with Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, and finally with Jesus in the "New Covenant" (or "Testament" – another Hebrew word for covenant).

The text then tells us, "Noah did this: he did all that God commanded him." And "the flood of waters came upon the earth" (6:22; 7:6).

According to the chronology of the second story of the flood, the flood lasted from the 17th day of the 2nd month of Noah's 600th year (7:11) to the 27th day of the 2nd month of Noah's 601st year (8:14), or in other words, 12 months and 10 days. What is particularly intriguing, however, is that author's description of that flood. "All the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. And the waters swelled (or "poured forth") on the earth for one hundred fifty days" (7:11, 24).

What is described here is not simply an enormous storm or even the breaking of a breach with accumulated waters flooding into the flood zone. What is described here is all hell breaking loose -- the disintegration of the world. The description of the flood (e.g., "fountains of the great deep" and "windows of the heavens") is a direct reference to Genesis 1:6-9. On that second day of creation, God commanded, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters" so that "dry land appear" (1:6, 9). Out of the chaos of interstellar space described in Genesis 1:1-8, the chaotic "soup" of creation had to be in some way "tamed" by God's word if a planet were to emerge. Therefore, the Hebrews believed that God created a dome which spread over the world. Much as does a soup bowl, when being washed upside down in a larger bowl, create an air pocket that separates the waters "above" that bowl from the waters "under" that bowl, so the Hebrews envisioned the primeval "dry land" emerging. It is that perspective to which the writer of Genesis 1 is referring as he presents the rationale for the creation of dry land out of the "soup" of universal watery chaos. "And there was evening and there was morning, the second day" (vs. 13).

Now, in the flood description, the author envisions that dome disintegrating so that the chaotic waters held at bay by that dome over the earth, and the waters below the earth also held at bay by the earth suddenly break through. Thus, the waters that formerly were above the dome and the waters formerly below the earth meet in a great avalanche of water that obliterates all life (save Noah, his family and animals safe in the ark) from the earth. Thus, humanity's lust for power, wealth, and domination of the earth and even of God comes to an end with God's action that reverses God's great work of creation and destroys all that God had previously made.

“And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days. But in the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth. And Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God said to Noah, “Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living being that is with you of all flesh – birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth – so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.” So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families” (7:24; 8:14-19).

Thus, the story ends. Noah and his family leave the ark, as do all the creatures. And “they abound on the earth, and are fruitful and multiply” (vs. 17). Thus, they repopulate the earth under God's covenant made with Noah, so that once again humanity begins the building of God's shalom community. The first experiment had failed. What would be the fate of this second experiment?

Psalm 46 deals with God's defense of Jerusalem (and therefore, by implication, any city) and its people. The psalm's opening lines describe God's commitment to the city and its inhabitants.

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult” (46:1-2).

The Psalmist declares that God will be “our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble”, even in the midst of the most violent of earthquakes or even of a tsunami caused by that earthquake. God is with us, protecting us and providing refuge to us, no matter how cataclysmic nature or human disaster might be.

“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge” (vss. 4-7).

The mood of the Psalm suddenly shifts. Whereas verses 1-3 were describing chaos and mass destruction, the image of verses 4-7 is tranquil and subdued. “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of god.” Here, the city or “the holy habitation” of God is described as at

peace, fecund from the river, an oasis of tranquility and rest. And the reason why is clear to the Psalmist. “God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns” (46:5). The very presence of God in the midst of the city causes it to be tranquil and at peace.

Suddenly, the mood shifts for the third time, as if an orchestra is playing a great work which alternates between storm and peace. “The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts” (vs. 6). Even when the city is in turmoil and struggle, either from natural catastrophe or human war, “the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (vs. 7).

Now, into the third stanza, the conflict continues:

“Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. “Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth.” The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (vss. 8-11)

God brings desolation and destruction. But God also brings peace, security and tranquility. “He makes wars cease; he breaks the bow; he burns the shields.”

Then the Psalm enters into its final moment of meditation and peace with what are some of the most profound and most quoted words from the psalms, second only to the 23rd Psalm.

“Be still and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth” (vs. 10).

These are not the words of the Psalmist in this text. These are the words spoken by God! And they are God’s only lines in this psalm. This is God’s instruction to us: “Don’t fret. Don’t become anxious. Do not fear. Simply be silent and let your heart and your emotions be still. Allow yourself to be at peace before God”.

And why? Because, in the final analysis, God is in charge – in charge of the earth, of your city, of all the nations of the world. You can leave the world in God’s hands; you don’t have to manage anything. And you need be responsible only for that to which God has called you to be about in your ministry.

Therefore, the Psalmist concludes, “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (vs. 11)!

Matthew 7:21-29 draws the Sermon on the Mount to its climax. And what a climax!

As the Sermon on the Mount approaches its conclusion, Jesus concentrates on the question, “What does it mean to authentically serve God? He answers that question in Matthew 7:21-23, and then closes with an illustration that makes the application to all his hearers. In approaching

that question, Jesus has set the stage by a series of assertions. He has previously stated in the sermon that authentic Christian life is lived out in a faith that is free from the striving for power, prestige, parochialism and possessions (6:25-27). It means being free of judging the motives or actions of others (7:1-5), of living in a receptive, hands-open way ready to receive all that God has for you (7:7-11). It means always being open to the holy in your life and in the world (7:6). Then Jesus summarizes life lived in God's Kingdom in one magnificent sentence.

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (7:14). In this “Golden Rule”, Jesus states the outworking of authentic faith. You want to be treated justly? Then treat others justly. You want to have wealth adequately shared with you? Then share your wealth fully with others. You want to be treated with love, respect and caring? Then treat everyone around you with equal love, respect and caring. You want to be loved by God? Then love the poorest beggar at your gates with the love with which you want God to love you – and you will discover the love of God in your compassion for those most marginalized in life. This is the final summary of the Law – to treat every other human being and all of humanity the way you would want to be treated yourself. This is the “bottom line” of true religion – and all the rest is window-dressing!

Jesus then presents the concluding proposition of his sermon. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day, many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers’” (7:21-23).

What does it mean to be an authentic follower of Jesus? What does it mean to authentically do the will of God? Jesus presents three criteria.

First, there are supposed followers of Jesus who will call him “Lord, Lord”. In the Hebrew culture, the doubling of a name was not a statement of intensity, as it would be in English (“Lord, I really mean what I’m saying”). Rather, the doubling of a name was an address of deepest intimacy (see Gen. 22:11; I Sam. 3:10; II Sam. 18:33; Luke 22:31). Thus, there are those who believe with all their heart that they are following Jesus and are perceived by their followers as those who authentically follow Jesus. These are people who give the impression of deepest fellowship with Christ. “But it isn’t intimacy that I desire,” Jesus declares. “What I only want is followers who “do the will of my Father in heaven””.

Second, there are supposed followers of Jesus who will “prophesy in my name”, who will preach the most penetrating and insightful and revealing and profound sermons that will bring people to tears, to resolution to follow Jesus and to repentance. “But it isn’t great preaching I desire,” Jesus declares, “but to do the will of my Father in heaven”.

Third, there are those who will “cast out demons in Jesus’ name”, supposed followers who will heal people physically, mentally and spiritually, and/or who will perform many miracles. Their ministry will produce great fruit – booming congregations, large numbers of people coming to Christ, profound success and adulation of the people, and even significant political influence

through their pronouncements. “But it isn’t great miracles or healings I want,” Jesus declare, “but to do the will of my Father in heaven”.

Jesus cuts directly not only to the human praise, prestige, power and the wealth that inevitably comes with great influence that his contemporaries – the Jerusalem Clergy Aristocracy, the Pharisees and Sadducees experienced. He is also intentionally cutting to all the forces in any human society that would encourage any of his followers to seek after comparable position, prestige and influence. For the temptation to which Caiaphas and Annas and Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea would yield – whether opposing Jesus or secretly admiring him – is the same temptation to which Peter and Andrew and James and John and Judas could yield! So Jesus astutely argues that what he wants out of his followers are not those who search for intimacy with him, nor great messages, nor powerful and impressive ministries. To yearn after these is to yearn after the marks of Satan, not Christ. We are not called to do great things for God! Nor are we called to be in a deep, mystical relationship with Christ!

Dale Bruner puts it in the plainest and most penetrating language possible. “Thus it is not really sufficient for the Christian community to ask of its leaders, “Are they Christ-centered?” They must also ask, “Do they seek to keep, and do they encourage others to keep the Commands of Jesus?” Nor is it enough to ask, “Do they win others to Christ?” They must also ask, “Do they seek to do and to move others to do the will of the Father?” Neither the Christ-like (sheep’s clothing) nor the Christ-centered (“Lord, Lord”) are necessarily Christ’s. All of us are in the dock here”!¹

The obvious question this statement by Jesus forces us to ask, if we wish to be authentic followers and ministers of Christ, is the question “What does it mean to do the will of the Father? What is it that Jesus wants out of us?” That is exactly the question the author of Matthew wants you to ask as you read his book. And that is exactly the question he is seeking to answer both in his recording of the Sermon on the Mount and in the primary content of his entire book.

What Jesus wants out of us is not intimacy nor persuasive preaching nor the building of great churches, ecclesiastical empires nor even carrying on great ministries of miracle-working for and enhancement of individual peoples’ lives. What Jesus wants out of us, according to Matthew, is to center our lives, our work, our ministries and our whole existence on bringing to fruition here on earth the kingdom of God (even though, through our own effort, we can’t achieve that kingdom). And we effectively work for God’s kingdom as the patriarchs of Israel, Moses, the obedient kings and the prophets before Jesus worked. We do it, not through the obedience of the minutia of the Law nor the practice of religion nor seeking personal intimacy with Christ nor working to build personal (even if religious) kingdoms of power, prestige, possessions or parochialism. We do it by “acting justly, loving each other tenderly, and walking humbly with our God” (Micah 6:8). We do it by working for justice for the least of these in a world given over to lust for power by oppressing its poor, by working for the equitable sharing of wealth in a world given over to greed that exploits its most vulnerable, by working to build a people of intense love and trust in each other in a world dedicated to dominating all those not like us. That is truly to know Christ. And that is to authentically serve Christ.

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), pp. 356-357.

Charles G. Finney is considered by most church historians to be the most influential and most successful revivalist in the history of the USA in the long-term impact of his ministry.² It was his preaching and then his later teaching at Oberlin College that brought about much of the organizing of the church to work for the elimination of slavery, the education of African-Americans, the fight for the rights of women, and the empowering of the poor and America's manual laborers.

Finney wrote in his book, *Letters on Revival*, "The great business of the church is to reform the world – to put away every kind of sin. The church of Christ was originally organized to be a body of reformers. The very profession of Christianity implies the profession and virtually an oath to do all that can be done for the universal reformation of the world. The Christian church was designed to make aggressive movements in every direction – to lift up her voice and put her energies against iniquity in high and low places – to reform individuals, communities and governments, and never rest until the kingdom and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High God – until every form of iniquity shall be driven from the earth. Now when we consider the appropriate business of the church – the very end for which she is organized and for which every Christian vows eternal consecration, and then behold her appalling inconsistencies everywhere apparent, I do not wonder that so many people are led to avow the solemn conviction that the nominal church is apostate from God. When we consider the manner in which the movement on behalf of the slave has been treated by churches and ministers throughout the land, is it any wonder that the Church is forsaken of the Spirit of God? The great sin and utter shame of the Church is in refusing to speak out and act promptly and efficiently on the great questions of social reform. Abandon the great work to which they are pledged and sworn, and yet profess to be Christians? Not until the Church shall arise and take a different attitude, I am confident that nothing else can be expected than a retrograde movement on the part of the Churches until not even a form of godliness remains among them!"³

We have been taught to read and preach the Bible in a way that does not threaten the status quo of the way that our society is currently ordered. We have been taught to present a Bible that does not challenge the Christian community with the call to justice, equity and compassion nor to lead our people to publicly practice together a politics, economics and religion that will turn the world's systems upside-down! Well, for those who read and preach the Bible in such a way that it protects and even endorses our present society – a society that is centered on oppression, exploitation and domination – Jesus declares "Even though you preach in my name and build great churches to honor me and bless the people around you with great works, I never knew you; get out of my face (which is what the Greek literally says), you evildoers" (7:23)!

² See V. Raymond Edman, *Finney Lives On: The Secret of Revival in Our Time* (Wheaton, IL.: Scripture Press, 1951); Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964); Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, *The Anti-Slavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (NY: Harcourt, Brace and world, 1964), Donald W. Dayton, *Discovering An Evangelical Heritage* (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson Publs., 1976); Peter Marshall, *From Sea to Shining Sea: America's Spiritual Heritage During Her Formative Years* (NY: Revell, 1986).

³ Charles G. Finney, *Reflections on Revival* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship Inc., 1979), compiled from pp. 111-119.

Now Jesus drives his sermon home with a closing illustration (the best way to end a sermon)! “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall” (7:24-27)!

All of life is choice, Jesus is saying through this parable. Do you choose to live by the New Law of Jesus – which is the true essence of the Hebrew Law? Or do you choose to live for self – even as a religious leader? Do you choose to work for God’s shalom community by working for justice and the rights of the poor, the powerless and the marginalized? Or do you choose to seek to build your power and prestige by building your own kingdom (no matter how ecclesiastical)? Do you choose to seek in all you do to use your influence to bring about an equitable distribution of wealth so that no one is poor nor exploited by others? Or do you choose to endorse the current economic system, no matter how unjust, because it will better serve your purposes? Do you choose to center your life openly and in caring, trusting relationships with God and all humanity? Or do you choose to make the accumulation of something other than God into your god? Life consists of choice – a narrow or a broad road, a tree of bad fruit or good fruit, authentic faith or a miming faith (7:13-23). Build on Jesus’ priorities and commitments and you will build a house on sure foundations. Build on the promises and goals of the dominating culture, and you will build on sand (7:24-27)! You choose.

The sermon then ends with Matthew’s final commentary on it. “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (7:28-29). The sermon ends with a concluding statement that ends each of Jesus’ five major teaching sections in Matthew (7:28-29; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). The sermon calls his disciples to accountability, but the crowds hear it and recognize that they are hearing truth – truth as if from Israel’s prophets of old, and not like the theologically orthodox message of Israel’s religious leaders that calls them to little more than conformity to the dominant culture of Rome and Israel designed to keep them “in their place”.

Romans 1:16-17; 3:22b-31. All the lectionary scriptures for the 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time are about the person who has been liberated or protected or redeemed is the one who responds in faith to the work of transformation being done by God – whether that transformation is individual and spiritual or whether it is social and has to do with the reforming of society. This theme is the heart of the epistle lesson from Paul’s letter to the Church in Rome. The lesson begins,

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’” (Romans 1:16-17).

To unpack this passage, one must keep in mind how the word “salvation” was understood in the Roman world of Paul’s time. It was not a religious word but rather a political word, much like the word “redemption” which had an almost exclusive economic meaning. The word “salvation” was always ascribed to Caesar, the Roman emperor, for it was through his rule, his enforcement of Roman law and the massive military force he commanded that he was able to guarantee “salvation” or “safety” to the world. Thus, it was Caesar who was perceived as the Savior of the world.

But Paul declares something quite different. He states that the “gospel” is “the power of God for salvation”. It is not the emperor or Roman domination under which the world will find peace, justice and equity. It is under the “gospel” of Jesus Christ. Thus, God calls us to surrender all our lives to him rather than in allegiance to Caesar. And we assume that surrender by acting out of faith. For the gospel is “salvation to everyone who has faith”. It is in the possessing of faith and through the acting out of that faith that one pledges his allegiance to Jesus rather than to Caesar. And that is true for “the Jew first and also to the Greek (or Gentile)”. Jesus salvation (rather than royal salvation) is available to anyone who has faith in Jesus as monarch, whether that person is a Jew (who gets first choice because his people were the ones who preserved the revelation of Yahweh as king of the universe) or a Gentile (and thus previously loyal to Caesar).

The vehicle of allegiance and loyalty to Jesus (and thus to God) is “faith”. For it is “the righteousness of God that is revealed through faith for faith”. Authentic relationship with God comes “from” faith, “through” faith, “by” faith, “resulting in (“for”)” faith. It is all faith. The embrace of Jesus as the focus of one’s political, economic and spiritual center is an act of faith on our part (how do we know it’s true); the embrace is activated by faith, continues by faith, and results in creating even more certain faith. It is all about faith, not good works.

Paul then demonstrates that his assertion that it is the centrality of faith which is the grounds of allegiance to Jesus the Caesar is confirmed by Old Testament insights, as well. To demonstrate this, Paul quotes from Habakkuk 2:4. The NRSV translation of that Old Testament passage, “The one who is righteous will live by faith”, however, is not a particularly good translation. A better translation would be “The one who is justified by faith will live” (which any Jew reading Romans 1:17 would already know). That is, God grants life to the person who is already made right by his faith in God. The person is motivated by God to pledge allegiance to Jesus the Caesar because he has consciously made the decision to embrace Jesus as Caesar (Lord, Christ, Messiah – all words meaning precisely the same thing). And because of that act of faith, his faith is both rewarded with the sense of God’s presence and embrace and thus he receives new hope and even assurance that this was the right decision.

Paul then continues in 3:22b-31. “There is no distinction (between Jew and Gentile), since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

“Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law” (3:22b-31).

This passage drives the point home that the centrality of living life under the authority of Jesus is an act of faith. That is simply demonstrated in the amazing number of times that Paul uses the term “faith” in this passage – a total of ten times! It is more profoundly demonstrated by how the word is used. Paul’s assertion is that humanity’s salvation (a political term – vs. 22), redemption (an economic term – vs. 24) and atonement (a religious term – vs. 25) occurs, not through Caesar (a political term – vs. 22), slave owners who ransom a slave (an economic term – vs. 24) or one playing the role of a priest (a religious term – vs. 25). Rather, it comes through the actions of Jesus as savior (political), redeemer (economic), and priestly atonement (religious). It is God who has done this work through Jesus. We do not earn such salvific embrace by God by our good works or by our obedience to the Law or even by our faithfulness in following Jesus the Caesar. We receive it as God’s freely given gift to us which we accept by faith – not our faith, but the faith activated in us by God so that we can respond in faith (vv. 25-26).

Therefore, can we boast about becoming a Christian? Can we take pride in our faithfully following the Law? Can we point to our good works? All three questions must be answered in the negative. For we didn’t storm the gates of heaven and twist God’s arm to grant us salvation by the merit of our action. We receive the gift of God’s political salvation of us, our economic redemption and our spiritual atonement purely as God’s gracious action toward us. For it is God through Christ who opens his arms to us and gathers us in his embrace; we don’t pry open those arms! “For we hold that a person is justified by faith, apart from works prescribed by the law” (vs. 28). It isn’t about us. It’s about Christ. And it’s about the action of Christ to transform us politically, economically and spiritually. And it has been our privilege to respond in embrace to the embrace extended to us and already engulfing us! It’s all about God!

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