

Satisfy Us in the Morning
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United Church of Strafford, Vermont
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Psalm 90; Mark 10:17-31

Call to Worship: Progressive churches do not often talk about God's wrathful vengeance, but the concept has some usefulness, as do sin and hell.

The useful truth behind them all is that it feels awful to be separated from God or divided from one another or blocked from being our truest, best self. It feels like punishment. It feels like hell.

In Taoism there is a saying, "If I had even the tiniest grain of wisdom I would walk in the sacred way and my only fear would be of straying from it." When we are in the Tao, the Way of Christ, we open to God's love, and we can experience oneness with the Spirit that flows through all people and creatures, and we can feel the peace and joy that come of it.

Church reminds us that we can be in or out of that sacred way, depending in part on our choices and responses to life. We were created to long to follow the Spirit and dwell in it. That is what our nature, and all nature, wants us to do, and the church is here to help us.

So let us open our hearts and minds to the word, music and silence today, and the Spirit flowing through them, to help our life be the best that it can be.

Let us worship together...

Time with the Children: Good morning! I will begin with a story told by my friend, the late Marshall Dodge, about Downeast Maine.

A man named Burt went to hear a famous socialist talk. The next day Burt was down at the store telling his neighbor, Enoch, how great socialism was.

Enoch asked, "So Burt, in this socialism you share things, if you have more than you need, so that others who have less can have what they need, right?"

Burt said, "That's right."

"So Burt, you mean to tell me if you had two tractors, you would give me one of those tractors?"

"That's right."

"Or if you had two barns, you'd let me have one of those barns?"

“That’s right.”

“Or if you had two pigs, you’d let me have one of those pigs?”

“Darn you, Enoch, you know I’ve got two pigs!”

It is one thing to understand what it takes to live a good life, but it is a whole other thing to be able to do it.

I had a cousin who was part of a big church in Ohio. One day after many years of being very involved something finally clicked and she went to the pastor and asked him if he really meant that she was supposed to love everybody. He said “yes.”

“Even people who are unlovable?”

“Yes, Jesus says we have to love even our enemies.”

“Well I can’t love unlovable people, so I quit.” And she never went back to church.

It was too bad, because she didn’t have to quit. When the Bible says to love our enemies it doesn’t mean we have to like them, it means we should treat them with compassion and lovingkindness even as we resist them. And you never know, maybe in time we will forgive people for being unlovable, or maybe in time they will change, with the help of God.

She didn’t have to quit, but it raises an interesting question. How far are we willing to go in order to be like Jesus? If we are not willing to be as loving and generous as he was, if we are still a little selfish, still not perfect socialists who will give a pig to someone who has less, it’s OK, it’s natural, but we should still keep trying to be more like Jesus, because if we were, we would have a better life, and if everyone were that loving, it would be a better world. We shouldn’t quit.

Guess what helps us grow to be more and more like Jesus?... Prayer!

Let us pray together the Lord’s Prayer...

Sermon: *Satisfy Us in the Morning*

Both scripture passages today ask whether we are doing everything we can to make our lives meaningful and fulfilling, aligned with the sacred way, the kind of lives that death cannot defeat. Both passages challenge us to decide whether we really trust in the Spirit of God to make our lives the best they can be, and if so, whether we are willing and able to turn our lives over to the Spirit’s guidance and care.

The passages call to mind Augustine's famous line, "For you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." We suffer when we are separated from the Spirit's sacred way, not because God is punishing us, but because the spiritual life connects us to the source of steadfast love and joy, and our deepest calling. To live disconnected from that source results in meaninglessness and despair, because we are cut off from what we were created to be and do.

We can be cut off from God by actions of our own choosing, or we can feel cut off by body chemistry or for no reason we can detect. Whatever the cause, seeking to improve our connection to the source of love and spiritual power is the path to a better life.

The central prayer of the Psalm is this: "Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart." In other words, help us to see that life is short and choose the wise way to live that makes the most of that short span.

Then it says, "Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days."

That is the Psalm's wise way to a better life. It is a prayer asking God for gifts that will satisfy us. At the same time it is also a challenge to let ourselves be satisfied by what God gives.

The 90th Psalm is the only one attributed to Moses, so the image of being satisfied in the morning recalls the children of Israel finding manna in the wilderness that appeared as the dew dried, the bread God gave them to keep them alive. They could not store it because it would spoil overnight. They had to trust that it would reappear tomorrow. And they had to let go of their desire for pizza or Indian take-out or chocolate cake if they were to be satisfied with that same food day after day for forty years.

"Satisfy us in the morning," is a prayer that we be able to live both in complete trust in the Spirit's guidance and power, and in acceptance and gratitude for whatever God's love provides.

Today's scriptures ask us to imagine how good it would feel if we did not need things to go our way all the time, we did not need approval from others, we did not need financial security, we did not need to be perfect or successful or in control.

Imagine how free we would be if we could let go of those insatiable desires and follow wherever God's love led us. We could find God's work everywhere, we could find the Spirit's

sacred way through every circumstance, and we could see our role revealed as an instrument of God's love on earth as we went through our days.

The passages do not require that we imagine a life different from the one we are living—we could have the same activities—and yet it could be completely transformed by this one change of what we desire and what makes us satisfied.

This is the Psalm's secret to being glad all our days. It is what Jesus is calling us to do. But of course, it is not easy. In fact, it seems impossible to let go of all our other desires and be satisfied by God's love and care. The gospel passage shows that.

Jesus tells a rich man to sell everything he has, give the money to the poor and then come and follow him. Then he will have the life that really is life and be satisfied.

The man would have to give up all his desire for the status and power, the security and pleasure that his wealth provides. It seems impossible.

Jesus admits it is like a camel going through the eye of a needle. But he also says that with God all things are possible. That is why we need to ask God to “satisfy us in the morning by your steadfast love.” We need the Spirit's help.

A man named Neal owned a business that went bankrupt. Neal was a lay leader of his church, and was very devout, reading the Bible and praying daily and living a life of service. His personal finances were all tied up in the business so he was ruined when it went belly up, but under the terms of the bankruptcy he managed to hold onto a few thousand dollars after the sale of his home.

Neal could not bring himself to let go of the few months' rent and food money that he salvaged, so he walked away like the rich man, sad and grieving, knowing in his heart that the right thing to do was to use every penny he possessed to pay back those who had supplied his business on credit, knowing that God would want him to be that free with his money and that Christ would clearly have been that generous-hearted and free from attachment, but he just could not do it. He was too full of desire for a safety net, he was too afraid of what his life might be like without it, he was too unwilling to trust that God would satisfy him in the morning with steadfast love.

We know stories about other people whose lives were ruined by their addictive attachment to alcohol or drugs, or made meaningless by their anxiety-driven ambition to be a rich corporate banker when their true joy and calling was to be an artist.

We know many dramatic tragedies like this, sad and full of agony, but there are less dramatic stories that are no less tragic.

There is, for instance, our own story. There is the tragedy of our own failing to be satisfied this very morning by God's steadfast love and our role in its realm.

What do we need to let go of now, what is our equivalent of the wealth of the rich man?

We do not have to despair over that question, because we know more stories than just tragedies. We know people who have overcome addiction with the help of their higher power, we know people who have overcome temptation, we know people who have overcome ambition, people who have taken the leap of faith to fulfill their life dream. We love stories of people who have changed and found a way to be satisfied in the morning by God's steadfast love.

The question is, what will our unfinished story be?

We will end this sermon in a spirit of prayer during which I invite you to envision yourself in that rich man's place. Close your eyes and take a few breaths to quiet your heart and mind...

And now imagine that you are kneeling before Jesus the way the rich man did, asking what you need to do in order to have the life Jesus wants you to live...

And now imagine that Jesus is looking at you and loving you for how hard you have tried to be a good person. Jesus sees who you are, flaws and all, and he loves you. Imagine that...

And Jesus sees that there are things you still need to let go of in order to be free to love and follow his way completely. What is it he is saying to you? What do you need to let go? What do you need to be free to do?

Let us sit with those questions in silence...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

The big bough of the maple
just came down.

How the doves loved to roost there.