

Zechariah 9:9-12, Psalm 145:8-14, Romans 7:15-25a, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

INTRO

Well good morning everyone, and a belated Happy Canada Day! Whether this last week has been a good one or a difficult one for you, it is good to take the time to refresh our hearts & spirits by opening God's Word, reading it & reflecting on it, to worship, and to pray. So thank you for taking the time to tune in to this message today, the fifth Sunday of Pentecost. As always, I'll invite you to pause this recording and to take the time to read the lessons assigned for today before resuming — and they are all really great lessons.

The OT lesson is Zechariah 9:9-12 — Zechariah is rejoicing because the King of Zion is coming to his people, and will release those who are imprisoned in the city, calling them “prisoners of hope” because they have been waiting for their deliverance, and now it is at hand:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!

...Behold, your king is coming to you;

...humble and mounted on a donkey” —Zechariah 9:9

It's a little foreshadowing to Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem the week that he was crucified.

Then the Psalm for today is Psalm 145:8-14, which is another call to worship God because he is gracious and merciful to us, he is good and his kingdom will endure forever. Our NT lesson is Romans 7:15-25a — this is Paul describing the inner turmoil of his heart, because even as a Christian he struggles with sin & his inability to do what is right & good. He cries out,

“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” —Romans 7:24-25

So you can hear Paul's relief that Jesus delivers him even from his own ongoing struggle with sin.

All of these lessons highlight for us what God has done for his people — for you and me — and leads us to praise God, to worship him, to glorify & lift his name up. And this is a key aspect of Christian worship — worship isn't really singing or praising God when we feel like it, or when the music is really good, or when we're singing our favourite song — worship is about praising God

even when things aren't going so well, when things are difficult, and when you feel beat up or tired or disinterested — because regardless of how we feel we have been given promises from God that don't waver or disappoint. They are steadfast, and they give us reason to hope and to rejoice despite the fact that everything might be burning to the ground around us. These things are temporary, but God and his promises to us are eternal and unshakable.

Finally, our Gospel lesson today is Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 — another great lesson in which Jesus calls us to come to him and promises to give us rest, even though most people around him didn't and don't understand him.

DOMESTIC TOILET PAPER DISPUTES

We don't fight much, but there are one or two things over which Marina & I have an ongoing dispute in our house, & I thought I'd take the time to air our dirty laundry today — this seems like an appropriate time for this...

One of those things that we fight about is which way to place a new roll of toilet paper in the bathroom. Marina (wrongly) believes that the roll should be placed with the paper running off of the front of the roll. And I (rightly) know that the proper way to place a roll of toilet paper is with the paper running off of the back of the roll. And this is simply for the reason that if you have a kid or toddler in the house who just can't avoid the temptation of unrolling the toilet paper, as they swat at that roll the paper will just flap around without actually unrolling. But if the paper comes off the front of the roll, as you swat it the whole roll will unravel all over the ground — I've learned this lesson the hard way. You can test this theory out yourself at home if you'd like — but there's no denying the proper way to place a roll of toilet paper in the bathroom.

Now, incidentally, I'm also going to be setting up a "Go-Fund-Me" account so that you can help your pastor out after he gets kicked out of our house once this message goes to air... No matter how many times we've gone back & forth about this, Marina won't change her ways — I would have thought that it would have been obvious by now...

TELLING PEOPLE WHAT TO DO & OFFERING THEM HELP

Have you ever noticed how people don't like being told what to do? You obviously know the right advice to give someone — in the depths of your wisdom you have just the right thing to say to the

person you know who is in need, but no matter what you say, or how helpful you are in telling them what to do and how to do it, (*cough—toilet paper—cough*) they don't want to hear it! People just don't like being told what to do — they want to do things their way.

Now, since they won't listen to your advice, you might decide that it's time to swoop in and to do the job for them — this is the next level of helpfulness in a friendship. If they won't listen to you, they might simply want to step aside and let you solve their problems for them. Now, I don't know about you, but when I've offered to solve people's problems for them (like sneaking around & switching the toilet paper rolls so that they're faced properly), that doesn't go over too well either. It seems that not only do people not want to be told how to do something right, they also don't want you doing it for them — go figure.

JESUS & JOHN THE BAPTIST

Now this might all sound pretty silly, but Jesus encountered something along these lines too. He said that John the Baptist came telling people what to do — he came as a representative of the Law — and people didn't want to hear it. They didn't want to hear how John was calling them to holiness — like some uptight stick-in-the-mud.

And then Jesus himself came, and he bent the rules, hanging out with outcasts — tax collectors & sinners — he reached out to help those who had fallen to the bottom of the barrel, and they rejected him for this too. It seems that people were offended both by being told what to do and by any offer of outside help. It's like driving around lost & not wanting to hear the person in the passenger seat with the map tell you where to go, but also not being willing to roll down your window and get help from the person outside who lives in the neighbourhood & who knows each street inside-out (that's not a real-life example by the way...). We tend to be like this with God though — not wanting advice or help because it threatens our independence — we don't want to admit that we're wrong, or that we're in need of help.

RECOGNIZING OUR NEED

But then something happens — we wake up & in a moment of clarity & honesty we see what we've done to ourselves and to others. We wonder why we keep sabotaging our careers, our

relationships, or our health. We might look in the mirror & finally see how critical & toxic we've become & we hate who we see staring back at us.

This is what Paul is describing in our NT lesson — this reality of knowing who he should be and how he should behave, but also recognizing that he's unable to be or do any of it. He keeps self-destructing even though he knows better. Have you ever done something you regretted? Or looked back on what you did in shock, saying, "That wasn't me! — Not the real me!"? That's what Paul is describing — this Christian experience of simultaneously being a saint saved by Jesus — made a new person, covered in his righteousness — & at the same time still in an ongoing fight with the very present reality of sin in our lives. And then Paul builds to this anxious cry,

"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" —Romans 7:24-25

See, Paul knows that God's office is at the end of our rope. One of the great theologians of the Reformation, John Calvin said,

"Failure makes us fit to receive his grace" —John Calvin, quoted in Bruner, *Matthew*, vol. 1, 538.

AMBERGRIS

I came across something really bizarre this week — it's almost embarrassing the things I read during Covid... Some 150 years ago there were massive whale hunts off the Eastern coast of North America & down to the southern hemisphere — a giant killing field not unlike the prairies during the height of the buffalo hunts. Boats were floating refineries that butchered & processed harpooned whales. Sperm whales were hunted for a material in their heads called *spermaceti*, but there was another product that came from a sperm whale that was also really valuable — although much more rare.

And this is where it gets really weird — sperm whales are deep diving creatures that hunt things like giant squid from the depths of the ocean. And so they produce a foul, grey material in their bowels that coat and build on things like the beaks of a squid or the teeth of sharks — anything that would be difficult to digest — to help pass these items or vomit them up without harming the whale. The whale will vomit up this material or pass it & sometimes it floats up on shore — it's

called *ambergris*. And it's also called *floating gold* because it's worth so much. Apparently, when it first comes up it smells like stinking death, but strangely with time, it starts to smell good — sweet even. It was used in perfumes to extend the aroma of the perfume, or as incense, and it's still used in some Egyptian cigarettes to add fragrance. Some people think it's an aphrodisiac, while others think it cures epilepsy. In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville wrote,

“...fine ladies and gentlemen should regale themselves with an essence found in the inglorious bowels of a sick whale.” —Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, ch. 92.

So, if you need an idea for an anniversary present for that special someone?

It is remarkable how a substance so putrid can become something so valuable. In moments of brutal honesty we might not like who we've become, or what we've done. We might be haunted by the ugliness of our hearts. Like Paul, we might know in our heads how we ought to behave, but the truth is that our hearts are rebellious & self-destructive — toxic & putrid. And it's exhausting — both living with ourselves, and trying to be better.

“COME TO ME”

And yet God doesn't flush us down the toilet bowl of history. His love instead compels him to reach down & save us, & to redeem us — making us into something infinitely valuable & beautiful. And in the depths of our weariness, of our lostness, Jesus says to us, “Come to me...”

“Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” —Matthew 11:28-30

Regardless of whether we are tired of all that's going on around us, or to us, or whether we're tired of who we've become and how we've self-destructed, Jesus has come to give us rest & release. The Psalmist today says,

“The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.” —Psalm 145:14

So while we may feel like prisoners of our own selfishness, sin, or brokenness, we are like Zechariah said, prisoners of hope. Hope in the return of our King, who will come to release us from all that we are enslaved to. Hope in the promise that our ugly, smelly, putrid acts & deeds can be

wiped away & redeemed into something that brings God honour & glory. Hope in the promise that we don't have to worry about which way to put the toilet paper roll, and measuring up to all of the other endless rules of a "rightly lived life". Hope in the promise of Jesus' yoke over our shoulders to guide us, to teach us, to help carry our burdens until the day in which we will worship him in eternity.