

Saturday, July 18

Joshua 6:1-14 *The LORD said to Joshua, “See, I have handed Jericho over to you, along with its king and soldiers.”* (v.2)

As Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land, he confronted a great obstacle. The city of Jericho, which stood in a strategic location, had to be overcome before the land could be conquered. But the Lord’s instructions to Joshua made little sense. He told Joshua to march around the city once for six days and then seven times on the seventh day. After the priests made a long blast on the trumpets, “have all the people give a loud shout and the wall of the city will collapse.” Most military commanders would have laughed at these instructions. No battle strategy looked more senseless. Nevertheless, victory was the result.

The easiest conclusion to draw from Joshua’s story is that obedience always leads to success. I sometimes feel that God is asking me to do something that would surely lead to failure. Sometimes, like Joshua, my obedience led to surprising success. Sometimes the result seemed to me to be a failure. I realize through all of this that my success or failure isn’t the point. The point God cares about is our obedience.

Psalms 30, 32; Romans 13:1-7; Matthew 26:26-35

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Sunday, July 12

Joshua 1:1-18 *“My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites.”* (v.2 NRSV)

The book of Joshua completes the story of how God led the Israelites from Egypt into the promised land. Joshua takes over after God led Moses to the top of Mt. Nebo and showed him “the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob...” (Deuteronomy 34:4). The timeless appeal of the story is its similarity to the pilgrimage that God calls each Christian to make.

At one time or another, most of us face an “Egypt” or hopeless situation, a “Red Sea” or seemingly insurmountable obstacle, and a “Promised Land” on the other side. For most, our calling isn’t as dramatic or exciting as that of Joshua or Moses. We may not have to risk our lives. No one will write a book or make a movie about it. But we find inspiration in leaders like Joshua to whom God has said, “Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (v.9).

Psalms 148, 149, 150; Acts 21:3-15; Mark 1:21-27

Monday, July 13

Psalms 25 *Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.* (v.16)

Psalms 25 speaks freely of the difficulty of life. The psalmist is worried about his enemies and the “violent hatred” they hold toward him. “O, guard my life, and deliver me,” he asks the Lord. He feels guilt about his sins. “Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress...and forgive all my sins,” he begs of the Lord. These are not happy days.

“Life is difficult,” wrote M. Scott Peck in his famous book, *The Road Less Traveled*. “This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths.” He went on to say that many people refuse to recognize this simple truth. “They moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if...life should be easy.”

Life is simpler once we recognize it is difficult. It neither owes nor awards anyone special treatment. The only difference for the Christian—though it is a huge one—is that we have a companion who makes the journey with us. We can say with the Psalmist, “Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth.” Our faith will then be strengthened by the Holy Spirit and our inner joy will overcome every difficulty.

Joshua 2:1-14; Romans 11:1-12; Matthew 25:1-13

Tuesday, July 14

Romans 11:13-24 *If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.* (v.18b)

In a recent gardening class, I learned that roots have four functions: 1) anchorage, 2) absorption of water and nutrients, 3) storage of food reserves, and 4) conduction of food nutrients to the upper parts of the plant.

In this passage from Romans, Paul compares the hearer to a “wild olive shoot” that was grafted into a “rich root of the olive tree.” Grafting one variety of fruit tree into the roots of another is a common practice among fruit growers. Since my father grew oranges for a living, I know that many orange trees are grafted onto lemon tree roots when they are young. Lemon tree roots are more durable and sturdy than natural orange tree roots.

This passage offers a remarkable metaphor for the way in which we are grafted into the Body of Christ. In Paul’s words, we have been cut from “what is by nature a wild olive tree” and grafted into a cultivated olive tree. This body or “root system” offers strength, sustenance, and nourishment we cannot find in the world.

Joshua 2:15-24; Psalms 26, 28; Matthew 25:14-30

Wednesday, July 15

Romans 11:25-36 *How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?”* (vv.33b-34)

I once thought that if I read the right verses long enough, found the right church, the right friends, and prayed enough, then somehow everything would be all right and I would no longer feel any pain. The key to happiness, I thought, was in constructing the right spiritual and social environment for myself. I inevitably learned that it’s impossible to build a box around my life to keep suffering out.

What do we do when prayers seem to go unanswered month after month, year after year? What do we do when troubling situations never change and old wounds and bruises do not heal? What do we do when there is no miracle? I have felt that way at various times.

I have learned that life changes, ebbs and flows. Suffering recedes, like the ocean waters, only to return a little while later. The only constant has been God’s love for me that continues to support me no matter how high the waters get. I marvel at “How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” And through my love for Him I can always say, “To Him be the glory forever.”

Joshua 3:1-13; Psalm 38; Matthew 25:31-46

Thursday, July 16

Joshua 3:14—4:7 *“So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.”* (v.7c)

Throughout history, men and women have built monuments to memorialize the struggles and triumphs of humanity. Who hasn’t been moved at the memories stirred by the Vietnam Memorial or the memorial depicting the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima? I shall never forget the emotion I felt when I first viewed the Vietnam Memorial and read the name of my high school classmate.

Joshua ordered the erection of the 12 stones at Gilgal for the same reason: “So that this may be a sign among you...these stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.” The memorial stones reminded the Israelites of God’s power in directing them out of bondage and into the promised land.

Memory is an important part of our soul and our spiritual life. Remembering the past brings insight into the present and foresight to the future. The body and blood of Christ in the elements of Holy Communion offer a memory of his past sacrifice, sustaining presence, and future hope. What personal “memorials” remind you of God’s actions in your life?

Psalm 37:1-18; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 26:1-16

Friday, July 17

Romans 12:9-21 *Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.* (v.11)

A friend who works in a business selling electronic sound equipment to churches says he’s tired of dealing with church leaders who are rude, demanding, and even dishonest. I am dismayed by the behavior of these Christians whom I hear about. I think they have forgotten that the character, integrity, and honor of the Christian is what makes the biggest impression on non-believers.

Developing Christian character seems to be neglected in numerous churches. Some churches emphasize correct and orthodox doctrine, while others stress evangelism. Some emphasize regular attendance at services that display a beautiful liturgy. Others encourage involvement in ministries for the poor and needy. While all these activities can contribute to building character, few churches stress Christian character as a discipline.

Today’s passage contains instruction for everyday Christian living: love one another, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, share material blessings, show kindness to strangers, display humility while avoiding arrogance, weep with those who weep, return kindness when mistreated, and live in harmony with one another. Charity begins at home and until we ourselves are healed, we limit our usefulness to God in being instruments for healing others.

Joshua 4:19—5:1, 10-15; Psalm 31; Matthew 26:17-25