

The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost – 2020

Zechariah 9:9-12

Romans 7:14-25a

Matthew 11:25-30

The Christian church seems to be in retreat. Why is that? We have not acquitted ourselves well in this hour, the hour of what presents itself as an “existential threat.” Our conduct in the last few months has hardly been heroic, hardly been the stuff of odes and songs and soaring tributes. The mature in the faith have not distinguished themselves by their radical devotion so that the younger generation becomes inspired to carry the mantle after us. That is a great sadness.

The Christian church seems to be in retreat. Why is that? It is not because we are any less well-armed than our predecessors. The Word of God is still living and active. The Spirit of God still animates the hearts of men. The Cross of Christ still stands towering over every land. The tomb of Christ is still radically empty, a promise unlike any other, a promise that addresses existential threats. The Christian church seems to be in retreat. Do you doubt it? The government says to the church: “Thou shalt not” and the church capitulates in a moment, not even wrestling with the nature of worship, how our communion with Christ constitutes who and what we are. Why is that? Look into your heart. What have you seen there in the last few months? Are you without sin? Has trust in God soared to newfound heights during this crisis? Does it show?

With every day the simple truth becomes more obvious: This is a test. I once spent a few days with my brother at his university. He is six years older than me and college life was something I was curious about so off I went to Willamette University to get a taste. He invited me, of course, and when I got there the activity level of the school seemed a bit restrained. Pensive looks were on the students faces. No frisbee in the quad. The tennis courts were empty. I thought college was one big party so the social restraint was a bit of a letdown. Robert and I did whatever we wanted with zero interference. We played a little one-on-one (the best court was absolutely empty). I finally figured out what was going on. It was finals week. Kids were cramming. Grades were on the line at a high-powered school. Okay, now I understand the demeanor on campus but what was my brother’s problem? He invited his kid brother, distraction incarnate, during finals week? He was unfazed, without panic – calm. He said something I’ll never forget. “Wiley, if you do your work the way that your supposed to during the term then you don’t have to cram at the last minute.”

That statement is wise, and it is an indictment. There is no warning when a spiritual test arrives, it’s not on the calendar like finals week. To be sure, we go through little tests all the time. Do we put our kids in Sunday school or do we disregard it? Is tithing a priority or can we pick it up and put it down as it suits us? Do I speak from the rooftops what the Lord Christ has whispered in my ear or do I silence my faith in the public arena because it is not popular? Those are all tests, quizzes. You can’t fail the quizzes and then expect to ace the final. This test, this spiritual hour is like the final. It’s a big one and the church seems to be in retreat. That is a blanket indictment. All are guilty. The honorable ones are the ones who admit it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer faced a test. The rise of National Socialism and the Nazi spider was a horrific test and a blight on humanity. Would you rather align yourself with Bonhoeffer or with

those who failed to speak, failed to act and lived to tell of their retreat? Does the church believe that there is anything worth dying for? As a preacher, I am idealistic, romantic, a dreamer. At the beginning of this test and the government's edicts I fantasized about how the church would respond. I had hoped that, quite opposed to houses of worship being empty, that the doors would be crushed with sinners who confessed that forgiveness in Christ's blood was the most essential commodity known to man and they would not allow anyone or anything to deprive them of it. *That* would make for a song. That would make for a song which the generations would sing as we stood vigil at dark moment. We are in retreat because we have failed our quizzes, our small tests, and we don't thirst for Christ above all things. That is most certainly true.

Jesus is with us. The Lord Christ is present in His church. He is the active one in this Divine Service to give to you what you neither deserve nor have earned. He longs for you. What He wills to give is for your great, great benefit. He speaks these words tenderly, to you. "Come to me, all who labor 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). What sort of rest are you looking for? Are you looking for lazy day rest, full belly and bank account rest? What sort of rest are you looking for? Worldly rest, a life without risk, without challenge, a life without tests? Some are. Some pursue that idolatrous rest with single-minded zeal. What is the rest that Christ provides?

This Divine Service is rest for your soul. This is where resurrection is the defining reality of time and persons. You are loved here with a divine love that wills to suffer for you, to save you and bless you with heaven. This intimate interaction with the crucified King sets you free from that which enslaves you – sin, and devil, and death. Freedom is rest. In Christ we are free. You have been delivered from all that which can possibly threaten you. Rest, sabbath rest, is where Christ's Word is lavished upon sinners who behave in a way contrary to their salvation and fear what has already been conquered. He wants you to learn of it; He wants you to learn of Him. We learn of Him and incorporate His life into our own. Have you something yet to learn? Or have you exhausted the depth of Christ's person and no longer need to advance in His ways? One thing that we are to learn is that He allows nothing to come between us and Him. Nothing.

Your need is total. No one could help you with the death sentence that is upon your head. Sin brings a crushing penalty. Your need is total. When you forget this then your devotion suffers. Where your devotion suffers, Satan finds a foothold. Satan speaks similar words. Come to me and learn what it is to be selfish, learn from me what it is to be lukewarm, learn from me of pride and spiritual excuses and how to laugh at the quizzes which God affords His disciples. Do you really think that Satan's burdens are light? Vain philosophy is presently taking people captive in droves. Christ is your only hope. Christ is everyone's only hope. Your need is total – not momentary, not to be put on the back-burner, not partial depending on how you feel. There is a coming tax to pay for our lack of devotion. If the church considers herself non-essential then we are about to enter a dark period not only for believers but for all humanity (that is a huge, Satanic tax). The time for pampering those who are fearful is over. It is time to realize that there is more at stake than your life in this world.

We have much to learn. And the beauty of it is that we have an eager Instructor, One who never forsakes His children, His learners, His disciples.

Come to Me – He beckons entreatingly. Take my yoke upon you; that is His cross. What have you to learn of His cross, what is there, on that deathly instrument, for you to learn? Here is one thing, here is one bright and beautiful and lovely thing – on that cross He yoked Himself to you. The God/man, Jesus of Nazareth, yoked Himself to humanity – born of a Virgin, God became man. So in love with you, He set His face toward Jerusalem to take the yoke of your sin on His sinless person, bearing it, bearing you. He bore that weight, that burden that He might give you rest. Rest in His righteousness. Rest in His Father’s favor. Rest in a clean conscience. Learn of His yoke, His cross, and His love and you will find something invaluable. You will find courage, you will find devotion, you will discover what true rest is. How do we come to Him? Well, where has He promised to be found? Where has He located Himself? He locates Himself in bread and wine. In the absolution spoken by the pastor, in the water of baptism and in the Word proclaimed. We want to go on learning, do we not?

Here is a story of one learner, one of our ladies. She was recently challenged, “You’re not still going to church, are you?” Do you hear Satan’s craft in that question? She replied that, yes, yes, she was. We will not be the weak link in holy history. We will not love our lives so much as to shrink from this hour. We do not want the next generation to be weak, soft, and submissive to anything except Christ the King. We gladly take His yoke upon us and we want nothing more than to learn from Him. We know the yoke of His cross is easy. We know the burden of His love is light. Knowing this, we are in retreat no more.