

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost 2021

Fill us, O Lord, with a sense of respect and awe, as you rouse yourself from your holy dwelling place to touch each of us ... just as we are, where we are. Praise your holy name.

Amen

I saw this article by Richard Rohr called “Who We Are Is Who We Will Be” In it he wrote;

“My colleague Brian McLaren has long explored what it might mean to be a “new kind of Christian.” Brian once wrote a fictionalized story about a pastor asking questions at the edges of his faith. Dan, the book’s main character, strikes up a friendship with an older, former pastor who mentors him into a larger, more generous, and loving Christianity. This pastor leads Dan through a thought experiment:

Imagine that you have just died and passed through the doorway of death. And you enter heaven. And it is a place of intense brightness, a place fragrant with goodness, a place alive with love. The presence of God seems to pervade everyone and everything. . . . In this place, people are humble and genuinely interested in others. . . . It is a place of true freedom, trust, and intimacy. And even though it is a place of great diversity, with people of all cultures and languages and times retaining all their uniqueness, it is a place where no one argues, no one fights, no one hates, and no one complains—not because they aren’t allowed to but because they don’t want to, because they accept and

love one another completely. They are fully alive. . . . Think about how you would feel entering that place.

OK. Now I want you to imagine that someone has walked beside you through that doorway of death. And that person has lived his life cramped in hatred and fear, tight in guilt and greed, ingrown in lust and selfishness. He has spent every day of his life complaining and being bitter and blaming others and being ungrateful. He has been suspicious of those different from himself, and he has become an expert at lying and cheating and using others. He is proud, arrogant, unwilling to admit he is wrong. . . Now, how would that person feel?

Could it be that the very light that seems beautiful to you would seem blinding to him? Could the very warmth of the love of that place that to you is so perfect seem to him horrible? Could the acceptance and love and trust and openness that welcome you seem to him disgusting, weak, terrifying, insipid, or repulsive? . . . Maybe it's not that there are two places beyond the door of death, heaven, and hell. Sometimes I wonder if hell is just what heaven feels like for those who haven't learned in this life what this life is intended to teach. I believe with all my heart that God is not willing for even one person to miss out on the joy and glories of heaven. . . . We are becoming on this side of the door of death the kind of people we will be on the other side.

Richard here: In the Gospels, Matthew's especially, Jesus teaches that we will face consequences for the choices we make in our lifetimes, but they are never for the sake of punishment. Instead, they are a manifestation of God's redemptive and healing love, which will ultimately prevail".

Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (Jossey-Bass: 2001), 90–91.

I found this story very interesting and gave me a lot to think about. It is quite different than our traditional ideas of what heaven and hell might be like.

Jesus tells us in Matthew in Ch 13:

40"As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. 41The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear."

Could Hell be suffering in a literal eternal fire, or could it be the pain of seeing others who are celebrating in the light, while that same light is blinding and painful to them? I, for one, do not know. Honestly, my concern is for all those

who like myself, are often struggling to stay on the straight and narrow path.

Who do not seem to fit neatly into good on one side and evil on the other.

As much as we do not wish to believe it, there are people who are thoroughly evil, have totally rejected God, and are beyond saving. That is a harsh belief for sure, at least from a human standpoint. However, having said that, it is not our place to determine who those folks are.

Let's face it, all of the folks we come across, including ourselves, make mistakes and sin. We try, we fail, we ask for forgiveness, and then we do it all again.

Where I get myself in trouble is not taking the time to try and see the other side of people who irritate the heck out of me. I don't do this well at all.

For example, I normally, try to avoid reading Letters to the Editor. I tend to be surprised at the amount of research many of these people apparently do before they write their letters. Note the hint of sarcasm here. Then the follow-up letters can be very demeaning. The impersonal nature of the Internet lends itself to not only mean-spirited comments about others but damaging and hurtful also. It has become effortless to post comments while ones' identity remains hidden. Obviously, this does not apply to everyone who posts on the Internet or writes a letter to the Editor. But I really try to do my best not to

respond. As Alice Roosevelt Longworth once said: "If you haven't got anything nice to say about anybody, come sit next to me."

My point about all of this brings me back to Psalm 1 this morning.

"For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction". This seems pretty straightforward.

I do not see any of us here as being wicked. I do not think that I know anyone that is wicked. I may have the opinion that some folks are idjits, but not wicked. We know people that say mean and hurtful things but are in no way evil.

William Schweiker, wrote an article back in Sep 2020 titled; "On Zealous and Unrepentant Times: A Call to Self-Reflection amidst a Dangerous Devotion,"

He said: "The ancient Greeks thought that "zeal" was one of the Furies, goddesses of vengeance, who could and would overcome people with a zest for the death of those thought to deserve it. In the Hebrew Scriptures we read of the first slaughter: " 6Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 7If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it." (Gen 4:6-7, NJV).

Call it mob rule or enthusiasm or mass hysteria, zeal can swoop in and animate people with hatred and bloodlust: flags on boats and pickup trucks; banners of one's cause; marches and rallies, conspiracy theories. Sometimes we have to search the heart and its passions when they become manifest in cultural forms. It is, then, time to reconsider zeal. ...

Frighteningly, in our time people fan the flames of passion and assume their zeal is justified. Politicians, preachers, and even our comics and satirists, are skilfully assured of the rightness of their cause. Few look inward to assess their own hearts or even the consequences of their actions. ...

When a zeal for what is true is lost among a people and the genuine work for justice fades into slogans, violence will surely follow, smug in the rightness of its cause and readily robed in piety." (End quote.)

—William Schweiker, "On Zealous and Unrepentant Times: A Call to Self-Reflection amidst a Dangerous Devotion," Sightings, September 28, 2020.

There is no doubt how divisive politics can be and how divisive we in society have been, concerning the pandemic, masks, and vaccines. One begins to wonder just how blessed we really are.

We need to remind ourselves that Psalm 1's division of life lived in one of two ways — righteous or wicked — is not based on politics. It is definitely not based upon wearing masks or refusing to get a vaccine. Psalm 1 is not a

description of what our political views should be. Rather, the psalm is a meditation on what happiness is. The underlying thought is that the truly blessed, have values that are God-centered and truly delight in the teaching of the Lord. “The way of the righteous” and “the way of the wicked,” is not about a political position or a social action, but a course of life. The Hebrew word underlying, “way”, is derek, which refers to a path worn by constant walking. So, delighting in the teaching of the Lord is not an occasional stroll, but a chosen route for one’s journey through life. This path will most likely affect how we vote on an issue or what social programs we support, but it is more than that. We need to exercise caution when we assume that those who make different decisions about politics or social issues, are on the wrong course or, worse, are evil. That judgment is up to God, not us.

It is OK to point out things we see as clearly wrong, but in the realms of politics and social issues, we need to respect that others may not share our opinions.

Psalms 1 says that there are those who are Blessed by God and those who are not, but we get over our heads when we decide who fits into which category.

That is not our job. One thing we **can** do is to work on seeing our neighbors as **whole people** rather than representatives of a conspiracy of ignorance. In so doing, we can build respect for one another. That is where we must begin.

Amen!