

“At the Lord's Gate”

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First Presbyterian Church
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OLD TESTAMENT LESSON – PSALM 118:19-29 NEW TESTAMENT LESSON – JOHN 14:5-14

An American tourist on a safari in the Sahara Desert takes a wrong turn and becomes hopelessly lost. After a long morning in the hot sun, he spots a man riding toward him on a donkey. “Please help me,” cries the tourist. “I’m dying of thirst!” “I’m sorry,” says the stranger. “All I have are neckties.” “Neckties?” cries the tourist. “I need WATER.” “I like you,” says the peddler. “Here’s what I’m going to do. I normally get \$15 each for these ties, but seeing as you’re suffering, I’ll let you have two for 25 bucks.” The tourist turns away in disgust and walks off. Three hours later, he sees an oasis. By now he’s on his knees delirious from thirst. As he crawls toward it, he looks up to see a man in a tuxedo standing under a palm tree. “Please,” he asks, “do you have any water?” “Oh, sure! PLENTY of water.” “Great, great. Where do I go?” “It’s this way, sir. The restaurant is right inside. Unfortunately, I can’t let you in without a necktie.”

Not much of a joke, I know. But it is a much better metaphor. The man imagines himself closed off from where he longs to be – the only place that has what he needs most, shut out because he failed to accept what a man riding on a donkey had to offer – the key to, what for him, is the gates of heaven, the passageway to life.

There are a lot of ways to get through life, to get to the places we need to be, whether that’s a closer relationship with a family member, a job or career that really lights you up, or in a time such as Lent, traveling alongside Jesus through the good times and bad. It’s just that sometimes, we don’t realize that what we pass up now might be just the thing we need later.

Throughout this sermon series, we’ve come to appreciate how human beings are first among God’s creatures, free to give voice to our faith, by turning our intentions toward God, realizing that God’s will is for life. Today, we see that this is true, whether we accept it or reject it, AND that in accepting God’s will, we need to appreciate that today’s useless necktie may be tomorrow’s key to our taking the next step – to moving toward God and a richer faith life.

The Psalmist in today’s Old Testament lesson pleads to have the gates of righteousness opened to him – the passageway to right living that brings God’s blessings – so that he may enter through it and give thanks to the Lord. He turns to God as the cornerstone of the gate saying, “I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” The psalmist is trying not to make the “mistake of the thirsty traveler” that rejects the very thing that can bring him to the life-giving water he needs.

Psalm 118 was particularly relevant to the Israelites upon their return from exile. Though free from Babylonian captivity, they were still dominated by other nations, nations that rejected God Almighty in favor of pagan gods and idols.

Don't we all have things that dominate us today? Some of us feel dominated by our workplaces; others suffer under the weight of illness in our families. Nobody wants to do homework or go to school if they could be out having fun. And try selling a house, finding a job or sending a young person to college in this market and not feeling at the mercy of forces beyond your control.

We can't escape the feeling that life's not always going our way, but what we can do is nurture and embrace the reality that life will go on, and that often what seems to be weighing us down today, pales in comparison to what God has in store for us tomorrow.

While the Israelites saw Psalm 118 in the context of their exile and deliverance, the early Christians found the Psalm to be prophetic in heralding the saving work of Jesus Christ. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," they shout. "Bind the festal procession with branches..."

Early Christians remembered how the world rejected Jesus with cries of "Crucify him, crucify him" even as God was elevating him as head of the church – the cornerstone, the apex of the gate through which the righteous – those who live life to its fullest – shall enter.

Today, we find ourselves in a similar situation. We strive to align ourselves with God's will, but get pulled away by distractions and temptations. And so we join our voices with those of ancient Israel and first-century Christians, who cried out, "Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!" Now I found that to be an odd bit of text in the middle of our reading for today. One minute we're listening to shouts of exultations saying, "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it," and in the very next instant we hear cries to God – "Save us, we beseech you!" But what the Psalmist understands is that we are constantly going from success to distress – and that in both instances, we need God to show us the way. And how God leads us toward right living, it's kind of like a computer game that has hidden power objects AND hidden traps, and God is like the programmer who ensures that we can find clues as to which things are important and useful and which are distractions and temptations better left alone. Our goal in life is to see past the slick design, the cool costumes and all the bells and whistles in order to find the clear pathway that God has set for winning the game – for achieving true success in God's eyes, even when sometimes doing what it takes seems like a waste of time.

David McNally is a 64 year old Australian based in Minneapolis who knows a little something about going from success to distress and then back again. Today, McNally's speeches earn him \$10,000 to \$15,000 each. But instead of talking about his success, this **international business speaker – who is one of only 186 people in the Hall of Fame of the National Speakers Association – today, McNally** stands on the firm foundation of a business failure – the rise and fall of his Sta-Power brand gasoline additive for automobiles.

“We were trying to be another STP, and we almost made it,” said McNally in an interview with Robert Johnson of The Wall Street Journal. “I was a great salesman. I drove a Rolls-Royce and had a beautiful home. But I wasn’t a great manager, and the business went into a decline that I couldn’t stop... I was flat broke and heavily in debt,” he says, “which were goals I can’t remember setting.”

McNally’s point is that “failure in business or a career (or anything in life) doesn’t condemn you to failure. (Success in God’s eyes never ends with your failure, though failure and struggle are often found along the road to success.) You have to see yourself separate from failures... “I wouldn’t be a true failure,” he says, “unless I never took another risk in my life, (unless) I went down and never got up.”

On the first Palm Sunday, a man named Jesus, who had risen to some level of fame, rode into town on a donkey. Passing through a crowd of onlookers, Jesus offers them the key to the gates of heaven, a sure way to true life. And within days they reject it, like throwing off a necktie or a scarf that feels a bit too tight around the collar.

As we go about our business this Palm Sunday, what’s to prevent us from throwing off what God offers – from heralding Christ as our sure foundation, the head and cornerstone of our faith, and with the very next breath rejecting him, just as surely as if we ourselves stood by and watched Jesus be crucified?

The Palmist calls out to God for salvation, saying “O Lord, we beseech you, give us success.” And then, he makes this declaration: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” Our success, whether it is in our day-to-day life or throughout our faith journey, is dependent upon He who comes in the name of the Lord. Not *our* name, but in the Lord’s name. Jesus was a success – both in life and in death – because he did everything in the name of the Lord.

In our Gospel lesson from the Apostle John, which Bob read for us today, Jesus says, “If you know me, you will know my Father also... Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you, I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these... If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; if in my name you ask for anything, I will do it.”

Standing at the Lord’s Gate, we gain success in life – and in death – by doing everything in Jesus’ name. That’s how we protect ourselves from rejecting that which God offers. *And* whatever we cannot do in Jesus’ name, we are not to do at all. If we can’t turn away a beggar in Jesus’ name, then we should not do it; if we can’t in Jesus’ name turn down an opportunity to serve, then we shouldn’t say “no;” if we can’t scold a child, argue with our spouse, or fight with a brother or sister in the name of Christ, then we shouldn’t be scolding, arguing or fighting at all; if we can’t order our priorities in the name of Jesus Christ, then we’d better stop to see in whose name we are living – our own; someone else’s? – *and* then take a look at how that’s going for us.

A Kansas rancher bought 10 ranches and put them together to form one giant spread. His friend asked him the name of his new mega-ranch. He replied, "It's called The Circle Q, Rambling Brook, Double Bar, Broken Circle, Crooked Creek, Golden Horseshoe, Lazy B, Bent Arrow, Sleepy T, and Triple O Ranch." "Wow," said his friend, "I bet you have a lot of cattle." "Not really," explained the rancher. "Not many survive the branding."

How many names do we brand ourselves with? And is there one name among them all that is above all others? There's no way for any of us to be righteous all the time. Only Jesus lived life perfectly. But we can seek to place the name of Jesus atop all that we do. In your role as father or mother, brother, sister, son or daughter; when we wear the hat of student, teacher, friend, or even stranger, we can strive to act in Jesus' name, confident that even when we fail to do so – when we go off without Jesus, having instead left him hanging -- just waiting for us -- God still gives us a chance to take him back, place him in our hearts – at the center of our lives – and thus, move a little closer toward true success, living life as God intended, and enjoying the blessings God bestows, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Eternal God, long ago on the first Palm Sunday, those whom Jesus loved greeted him with shouts of Hosanna.

We pray for those who call out to Jesus still, seeking guidance, mercy, acceptance, instruction, forgiveness, and, yes, God, seeking your presence in their lives.

We thank you for the young people of this church who have called out to you, especially for our Confirmation Class joining the church today. May they be met and guided by you in all that they do.

We pray for the children, whom Jesus loved and who greeted him with squeals of joy, and for those who greet him still, in the anticipation of Easter.

We pray for all God's children, of any age, and particularly, we pray for those people impacted by war, for those who feel unwanted and unloved; for any who suffer abuse, illness, addiction, or neglect.

Arouse our consciences, righteous God, about the fate of your people who needless fall on the altars of nationalism, social injustice, economic hardship, or religious persecution.

Energize us, we pray, to help at least one such person by giving of ourselves in whatever possible. And show us, even now, how you would have us serve.

We pray this, in the strong name of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.