

Isaiah 53:4-12
Psalm 91:9-16
Hebrews 5:1-10
Mark 10:35-45

SERMON FOR October 20, 2024

HEAVENLY CONTENTMENT

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: That man is happiest whose pleasures are cheapest. (Henry David Thoreau)

I was out on my morning walk a couple of weeks ago when I saw something I'd never seen before. My morning walk consists in walking in a circle around my yard over and over again – not very exciting, but then, I'm not a very exciting man, but at least it gets me out of the house and gets the blood flowing.

After you've walked around the same circle tens of thousands of times, you'd think you'd have seen pretty much everything there was to see, but this particular morning brought something new.

My neighbor Ed plants a little vegetable garden right by one of the sides of my track, and this year he planted tomatoes in the garden, so every morning as I walked by I was able to watch the progress of the tomatoes as they grew from little springs all the way up to full grown plants, their branches full of big ripe tomatoes, which I occasionally harvested for myself, with his permission, of course.

Anyway, by the time of this particular morning a couple of weeks ago, the tomatoes had pretty much been exhausted, but the plants were still there because Ed hadn't yet pulled them out or plowed them under; and as I was walking by the now somewhat bedraggled plants, something caught my eye. There was movement on one of the big cup shaped leaves, and when I stopped to look at it, I saw a little wasp sitting on the edge of the leaf, and making a sort of herky-jerky motion.

Now I'm not a particular friend of wasps, especially since many years ago I once stepped on a ground nest of a bunch of the little devils and ended up being stung twenty or thirty times – but that's another story.

This little guy didn't seem to present any danger, though, and I was curious about the odd little herky-jerky activity it was engaged in, so I stopped to study it more closely. He seemed to be sharply dipping its head down into the leaf then raising it and frantically doing something with its two front legs around its head, as if it were pawing itself. I was reminded of the way a cat wipes its wet forepaws on its face to clean it off.

But as I kept watching, now bent over so that I was quite close to it, I saw that it wasn't wiping its face. Instead, it was dipping its front legs into the dew that was still gathered in the leaf, then raising them and sliding them up and down on its two tiny little antennae.

It was washing its antennae!

I'd never seen anything like that before in my life, and I was mesmerized. At one point it actually paused, cocked its head up at me as if it realized that I was watching it, and then, apparently confident that I didn't pose any threat, went contentedly back to getting the grit or pollen or whatever it was off its antennae.

It was amazing. I remember thinking that maybe I was the only person who'd ever washed a wasp doing this sort of ablution, and then thinking, duh, probably every bee entomologist who ever lived has seen the same thing. Still, for a non-scientist, I felt like I'd been given a special gift, a special magical moment.

Finally I realized that my back was killing me from being bent over that long. I straightened up and stretched, and resumed my walk. When I came back again on my next circuit, the wasp was gone, apparently now having got its antennae all cleaned up and back in working order.

And I continued on, now pretty much floating on air.

What does that have to do with Christianity? Well, I'm getting around to that.

Let's begin by reading our Gospel selection for today.

Mark 10: 35-45

This is the third Sunday in a row we've taken our Gospel reading from the tenth chapter of Mark's gospel, and next week will be the fourth. It's often argued that this Gospel is the most amateurishly written of the four gospels, basically just showing Jesus proceeding from one activity to the next, without much in the way of explanation or commentary. But I personally think the author is arguably the

most artful and subtle of all the gospel writers, and I think chapter ten gives us a good illustration of that art.

The chapter basically follows Jesus through four separate incidents. Two weeks ago, we read from the first of these incidents, in which a Pharisee tests Jesus by asking him to interpret an Old Testament law concerning divorce, and Jesus does so.

Last week, Jim drew his message from the famous incident involving the rich young ruler, in which the rich young man tells Jesus that he's been very diligent about following all the Old Testament rules, and Jesus essentially says that that's all well and good, but there's just one thing more, something not mentioned in the Old Testament.

And now we come to this week's incident, the one we just read together. In it, the brothers James and John ask Jesus a question with which he's obviously not particularly pleased, and he gives them a somewhat mysterious answer, and the rest of the disciples chime in with their indignation. But whatever exactly that answer and the disciple's outrage are meant to convey, what I'd like to draw your attention to is what Jesus has to say in conclusion, where he draws the moral of the whole incident. Let's read it again:

"You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

10:43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,

10:44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

And now we begin to see the art, don't we, with which the author of Mark has presented these incidents, or perhaps the art with which the Holy Spirit has inspired the author.

The first has Jesus functioning within the limits of the Old Testament law; the second has him teaching the inadequacy of those limits, and the necessity of stepping outside and beyond them to follow him; and the third, shows him pointing

to the radically new way of thinking and understanding He himself has come to introduce.

And isn't that a lovely symmetry, when you look at it as a whole?

Which almost brings us back to my little wasp. But first, let's take another short detour.

Many other times from this pulpit, we have argued that the greatest challenge that accepting Christ presents, not just to our understanding, but far more importantly to the entirety of our lives as we conduct them during our allotted years on this earth, the greatest challenge is to come to see things the way Jesus sees them, to value them as He does, to measure things the way heaven measures them.

When Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem, he is not acting the part of a mere commoner. He is teaching us that royalty belongs on a donkey, that's where royalty, true royalty, heavenly royalty, is to be found.

When he says that it's harder for a rich man to enter heaven than a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, he's teaching us that excessive wealth, from heaven's point of view, is a problem, not a blessing. The things that wealth provide: admiration, freedom from concern, deference, luxuries, self-satisfaction and pride, these are obstacles, not blessings.

But you see how we rush to object to that teaching. We say, What matters is not the wealth, it's the attitude we have towards the wealth. But that's like saying, no, the cancer is not the problem. It's the attitude we have towards the cancer that matters. But no. The cancer actually is a problem, whatever our attitude towards it is. And so is excessive wealth. So is gossip, so is unforgiveness, so is moral pride.

That's what Jesus teaches, and now we begin to see how difficult the teaching is, and what a project it will be, for each one of us, to adjust our earthly desires to what heaven will have to offer us.

And for most of us that requires a major adjustment. When Jesus washes the disciples' feet, he's essentially saying: Look at what Jackie and Kathi are doing, when they carefully change the bandages on the feet of people who are unable to take care of themselves. That's what queens in heaven do. If you would be a

queen in heaven, learn to do that. But even more importantly, learn to find your own fulfillment there, complete and entire in itself, with nothing added. If you would be content in heaven, learn to be happy and completely fulfilled in doing that.

The earthly life each one of us has been given is not a test, one which, if we fail, dooms us to an eternity of punishment.

The life we've each been given is an opportunity to begin the transformation from creatures of dust into creatures of light, from earthbound, material flesh with its earthly point of view into beings capable of thriving and growing and finding fulfillment in what heaven has to offer.

And that brings us back to the little wasp, at last. When I went to bed that night and reviewed the events of the day, I found my thoughts being drawn to those few moments of quiet contemplation of that little guy or gal washing its antennae. It felt like I could remember every detail, and the whole experience, which only lasted seven or eight minutes, I expect, had a quality about it which I can only describe as timelessness: And now, weeks later, I still remember every second of that experience, every movement of that little wasp, how it felt to be drawn into the wholly new experience it presented, how I felt like I was being given a great gift, a priceless glimpse into God's beautiful bounty and providence, all provided to me, of all people, on my morning walk, completely free of charge.

But when I try to remember what else happened that day, I can with a real effort recall one or two things I did: went to the gym, the bank, had lunch somewhere. But they were like someone else's memories, something I'd read about, or seen in a movie, without any real feeling of timeless reality. Most of those experiences are lost to me forever, or to put in another way, all the noise and activity had now become matters of indifference to me, and I had no desire to let my thoughts go back and linger on them.

This is all sort of vague and touchy-feely sounding, I know. But I suspect it's the same sort of reflection that led Henry David Thoreau long ago to write the following, about the time he withdrew from the world and lived alone on Walden Pond:

You think that I am impoverishing myself withdrawing from men, but in my solitude I have woven for myself a silken web or chrysalis, and, nymph-like, shall ere long burst forth a more perfect creature, fitted for a higher society.

And I also suspect – based on all the instruction Jesus gave us – that the experiences of heaven are much more like watching a wasp at its daily bath than like cashing a check at a bank, much more like riding a donkey than driving a Ferrari, much more like changing someone’s bandages than sitting on a throne. And so the sooner we begin to appreciate those things, the more familiar heaven will seem when we arrive, and the more contented we will be there.

And so, Gracious God, our sermon prayer today is to help us reach the place where we can see the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower, where we can hold infinity in the palm of our hand, and eternity in an hour. In other words, help us to live and see and experience things the way Jesus does, and our prayer is in His name.