

that he once thought were nearly or actually perfect but turned out to still be a tad smoky. Jeannie Keith, 'Holy Mary', his own brother Charles.

So why do Christians never seem to reach perfection? Why does God not just zap the sin in and us, and let us show forth our new glorious selves to all the world?

Because he's gentle. Because he's lowly. Because God will be more glorified when the Holy Spirit does a great work in us. Because living in a sin sick world, it's not possible to deal with sin on a micro level – it spreads, it's contagious, it's generational, its deep. And "The wages of sin is death." And so, by the Holy Spirit God starts pumping in the anti-virials and tending to the wound for as long as it takes.

So, the Holy Spirit continues a slow and un-even work in all of us. Sometimes we're burning pretty bright. Sometimes we're filling the room with smoke. And Sibbs says "Perfect refining is for another world, for the world of the souls of perfect men." We will battle the sin within us all of our days – anticipating the new heaven and the new earth where sin will be burned away and all of us will be clothed in purity.

I'm not sure if you know the story of Florence Chadwick. She was one of the great long-distance swimmers of the 19th Century. She was the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions.

In 1952 she attempted to swim from Catalina Island to the coast of California, a distance of 26 miles. She was 15 hours into that swim when heavy fog descended and she began to think she wasn't going to make it.

There was a group of boats around her, supporting her in this swim, and so she stopped and asked them to help her out of the water. And it was only when she got into the boat that she realized she was just one mile away from shore. But she couldn't see it, the fog had her disoriented, so she gave up.

Friends, we are all, no matter your

age or stage of life, swimming life in a fog (smoke). Smoke caused by sin – ours and others. It can make us think there's no way forward...we can't see where we're going.

But this morning I want to encourage you. Jesus promises "A smoldering wick I will not snuff out." So don't give up. It's not hopeless. The sin within you is part of God's salvation story. One day we will truly praise God because he has released us from our propensity to do the same hurtful and damaging things over and over.

Flo Chadwick failed just a mile from her goal because she couldn't see where she was going. Two months later she tried again. And the same thing happened. The fog came. But this time she kept the vision of the shoreline in her mind.

And as we await the vision of Christ's return, we keep that horizon in our sights. And we pray come Holy Spirit and burn...burn away all that is unholy in me and make me new in your image.

And in the meantime, we thank God for his gentleness with us. Though we want to be a bright pure light in our world, we can't help but produce some smoke along the way. But even so, the little light we have is a sign that God has already chosen you to be perfect in his time, by his grace, for his glory.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

## ***"Gentle and Lowly: A Smoking Wick"***

*April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: Matthew 12:15-21*

*By Rev. Mike Putnam*

I was recalling this week the movie Have you ever met a Christian you didn't like? Of course you have, right? But aren't we all supposed to be changed, improved, a whole new upgraded version all because of our faith?

Haven't we been born again? Haven't we been clothed in righteousness? Isn't it an "out with the old and in with the new" kind of thing. Shouldn't we Christians be the most likeable people around?

Mahatma Gandhi famously said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

And that's a big problem in the church, isn't it? Hypocrisy is one of the world's biggest complaints about us. People find "church people" to be nothing like the person we profess to follow.

In fact, there are all kinds of Tick Tock, Instagram and Facebook jokes about how bad Christians can be. Saturday Night Live famously picked on the "Church Lady." At times, we're known for being down right terrible. And it's not only gossipy, judgy, moralism that is the problem. Christians have been accused of some really horrendous atrocities throughout history.

A historian once looked into the cost of Christians behaving badly. Studying such events as the Crusades – a so called 'Holy War', the Reformation – where dissenters were burned at the stake, the Witch Trials in Salem New Hampshire and so on, and he found that Christian regimes have killed about 200,000 people over a 500-year period.

And that's shocking given that we are people who follow a guy who once taught, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

In our time atheists like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens

have argued that religion is the problem with the world. Get rid of religion and the world will be a better place.

But is that true? What happens when religion isn't moderating our behaviour? Do people become nicer, less judgy, less gossipy, less murderous?

Well, again the historian looked into it and over the last 100 years, purely atheistic regimes have killed 100,000,000. So, the facts on the ground say differently!

But none the less, we can't hide the fact that Christians regularly behave badly, and if you hold us to our own standards, we don't get a very good grade.

But wait, is that what a Christian is? Is a Christian someone who doesn't struggle with the very same sins and problems everyone else does? No, a Christian is someone who knows their sin problem and recognizes their need for a savior!

And the funny thing is that most of the New Testament is made up of letters addressed to Christians behaving badly. If the early church was perfect, why did the Apostle Paul have to write so many letters of correction? Why wasn't he just writing saying, "Hey everybody, I hear all about the amazing things you're doing...great job! Keep up the great work!"

But the fact is that sin in the followers of Jesus has been a problem from the very beginning. You remember the day the kids showed up? Hey you kids, get outa here! This is not for you...go home! Oh, what...really Jesus? You sure? ...Okay, you kids come on back... Jesus would like to see you...right up at the front now.

You remember the time the evangelistic mission went badly and James and John had a solution. Hey Jesus, do you want us to go ahead and call down fire from heaven to

destroy these people? Want us to just kill 'em all?

You remember the time Peter said, “Nope, never heard of the guy. Jesus...Jesus...Jesus...not ringing any bells. Yeah, I know I have a Galilean accent, but it’s a big place...I don’t know everyone.

See, from the very beginning Jesus has had a bit of a problem with the people who claim to follow him. I’m not sure if that’s an encouragement to us, but it just seems to be the way things are.

But let’s not forget we see Christians doing amazing things too. All through history it’s the followers of Jesus who consistently suffer for others, who give sacrificially, who lead the way to peace, who look after the least, the last and the lowly.

So often it’s Christians working on the front lines of the most difficult circumstances in the world who are having the greatest impact. But sadly, that’s not nearly as titillating a headline as those who get it wrong and mess it up.

But the reality is that sometimes we live up to our own bad press. Sometimes we still act like people who do not live in the light of resurrection, and sometimes sin and hatred runs deep, sometimes we just get it wrong. And that’s why we need a Savior!

But this morning we can take heart, because Jesus has yet another promise for us, revealing what kind of saviour we’re dealing with. This morning Matthew tells us that the servant prophesy from way back in Isaiah is actually all about Jesus. And he’s not surprised about his family’s little sin problem.

“A smoldering wick he will not snuff out...”. What does that mean? What’s a smoldering wick? Well, think of one of those ancient lamps filled with oil. There’s a wick made of linen and that’s what you light. When it burns well it produces a nice clean light to fill your room, but sometimes it doesn’t burn very well at all. It just smolders. It makes more smoke than light.

In other words, Jesus knows that his church, at times, is going to make more smoke than light. Sometimes Jesus isn’t going to be too proud of his little “City of a Hill.” Sometimes we’re going to get it all wrong.

I’ve told you before that my call to ministry came in the midst of the worst church conflict I have ever experienced. There was a little group of people in a lovely church that Andrea and I attended after we were first married, who decided that the minister was no good and had to go. But they didn’t have much on him, so they just started making stuff up.

They gossiped and spread rumors, they complained and withheld their offering until finally it came to a head. Presbytery was called in, a review was had, the minister left, people were ordered to apologize for their bad behaviour, and we left and never looked back. I was pretty sure I was done with church at that point.

And yet, in watching that minister who was under attack face the lies and the evil so faithfully, I realized that this church thing matters. Sure, the church isn’t perfect – in fact sometimes it’s downright smoky. But it’s still Christ’s body here on earth. And Jesus seems to know that smoky believers is part of the deal.

But here’s the thing, hypocrisy in believers does not undermine the truthfulness of the Gospel. In fact, in a sense, it justifies it. We need a saviour. If we could all just learn to get along and be a little nicer, well then who needs Jesus? But man, do we ever need Jesus!

Richard Sibbs, the Puritan pastor from the 1600’s says “In God’s children, especially in their first conversion, there is but a little measure of grace, and that little mixed with much corruption, which as smoke, is offensive; but that Christ will not quench a smoking flax.”

And that’s the thing, isn’t it? The church is filled with people at different stages

of maturity. There are babes, and toddlers, young people and mature adults. But it has nothing to do with how long you’ve come here or how many years you’ve been a Christian. It has to do with the work of the Holy Spirit to renovate your heart.

Some people just seem to burn a little brighter. Some people fill the place with smoke. And they’re all Christians. They’re all saved, like it or not. Because our citizenship in heaven isn’t earned by our good deeds, it’s earned for us by Jesus and his good deeds.

So, here’s some good news. At times we will all surprise ourselves with how smoky we are. At times we will be ashamed by our own thoughts, words and actions. But Jesus wants you to know that your value is not in what you are today. It’s not that old thing about measuring your good deeds against your bad ones, and as long as your heavenly accounting works out, you’re fine. No, your value is not in what you are but in what you will one day be.

What will you one day be? Perfect. One day there will be no sin in you. You will not need to apologize anymore for losing your temper, you won’t need to avoid that person in the grocery store because of what you said or did, you won’t need to stay away from certain groups because of what they know about you. One day you will be perfect. But today is not that day...

And so, Jesus says, “A smoldering wick I will not snuff out.” Why? Because he’s already working on you to be so much more.

Sibbs says “Nothing in the world is of so good use as the least grain of grace.” If you’re here today, I have to believe it’s because God is at work in your heart. I’m not sure where he’s at in his building project – maybe he’s tearing down the old, maybe he’s framing things up, maybe he’s working on the trim and the paint - but if you’re here, he’s doing something in you, rest assured.

But until heaven each one of us has a double principle at work in us. There is “grace”

to be sure and there is “nature”. And sometimes our nature shows its ugliness.

But the seed of grace that is in you is from heaven – a gift from God to be kindled by God’s Spirit. You can’t kindle it yourself. You’ll just end up making a fire that is as smoky as a camp fire after a heavy rain. Pure clean light shines from us when God’s Spirit lights the fire.

But what is Christ’s purpose in letting us remain smoky? Why not just zap us when we become a Christian and all the sin falls away? Well, what if our lingering sin has a purpose. What if God is using it to breed humility in us and to magnify the love of God and the power of God to overcome our sin.

Can we become perfect in this lifetime? Have you ever met someone who was so apparently fully sanctified, that they seemed perfect?

You know, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism used to believe in something called Christian perfectionism. He believed that if people lived a certain way, tried really hard, put all the right boundaries and limits on themselves, they could achieve perfection.

But he changed his mind on that. Why? Because he hung around with people – even the best sorts of people.

In his journals he would often speak of one of his favorite saints, Sarah Ryan. He wrote of her, “One whose equal I have not found in England.” He often wrote to her using the highest terms of Christian esteem and affection.

But fifteen years after that he wrote to her with a different tone. He wrote, “For some time I have been convinced it was my duty to tell you what was on my mind...You appear to be above instruction – I mean instruction from persons...You appear to think that none understands the doctrine of sanctification like you do...You appear to undervalue the experience of almost everyone in comparison of your own.”

There were a number of other experiences with people in Wesley’s societies