

But it's not unreasonable that we should assume that our frail and broken hearts disqualify us from Jesus' grace. That's how it works in every human friendship. There are limits. Hopefully you have a "ride or die" kind of friend, someone you can turn to when the chips are down, the situation gets serious, when you're at your worst. But of course, if we offend enough, if the relationship gets damaged enough, if we betray enough times, we are cast out. That's how it works.

But you see, with Christ, our sins and weaknesses are the very "resume items" that qualify us to approach him. Nothing but coming to him as humble servants is required. First of all, conversion – a sincere commitment to put our faith and trust in him no matter what. And after that an unlimited "all access pass" to reach out to the one who will never drive us away.

Why? Because he's a door mat? Because he's so desperate for our approval and love? No, because even when we're at our worst he is still doing what the Father has commissioned him to do. He's still working history in our direction – even when it seems we're calling the shots – he's working history to our advantage.

There's one more promise in our text this morning. There's one more word of encouragement to buttress what we already have heard. Jesus says, "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day."

How many slip through his fingers? None. How many are finally too far gone to be saved? None. How many are outside of his power to redeem and make whole again? None. It's a done deal. It's a "fait accompli."

Why? Because eventually we will pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps? Because finally we will fly straight and, with Jesus as our model, we will get this life thing all figured out? No, because He refuses to drive us away – because he will never lose one

who is under his care.

But how do you know if you're one of his? Because you desire, however imperfectly, deep in your heart, to come to him. And in those moments when all seems lost – you do come.

My daughter and I have a thing we do. Once in a while she will say to me, "Daddy, spin me around real fast." I pick her up and hold her out and swing her around and around and around. She holds on for dear life, and she squeals with delight.

But of course, her strength is not nearly enough to keep her in my arms. The g-forces of being swung around at a great speed are far too strong for her. It's my strength that is keeping her safe. And yet, with all she has she holds on to me.

This is a picture for me of what Jesus is talking about here this morning. We cling to him, to be sure, but our grip is that of a small child. It's His sure grasp that never falters. It is He who keeps us safe. "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away."

This is the heart of Christ. This is heaven's delight. This is the saviour we're dealing with. Come to me, says Christ, and I will embrace you into my deepest being and I will never let you go.

He cannot bear to part with his own, even when they most deserve to be forsaken.

"But I..." we say. Raise your objections if you want. But just know that none can threaten these invincible words of Christ. "All those the father gives to me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away."

God is Almighty. You can build your life on these words. Thanks be to God, Amen.

"Gentle and Lowly: He'll Never Drive Away"

April 21st, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: John 6:35-40

By Rev. Mike Putnam

Let me introduce you to a version of god (small g) that is pretty common in our time. This is a satirical representation written by Greg Gilbert. He says:

"You might want to lower your voice a little before we go in. He might be sleeping now. He's old, you know and doesn't much understand or like this "newfangled" modern world. His golden days – the ones he talks about when you really get him going – were a long time ago, before most of us were born. That was back when people cared what he thought about things, and considered him pretty important in their lives.

Of course, all that's changed now, though, and god – poor fellow – just never adjusted very well. Life has moved on and passed him by. Now, he spends most of his time just hanging in garden out back. I go there sometimes to see him, and there we tarry, walking and talking softly and tenderly among the roses...

Anyway, a lot of people still like him, it seems – or at least he manages to keep his poll numbers pretty high. And you'd be surprised how many people even drop in to visit and ask for things every once in a while. But of course, that's alright with him. He's here to help.

Thank goodness all the crankiness you read about sometimes in his old books – you know, having the earth swallow people up, raining fire down on cities, that sort of thing – all that seems to have faded in his old age. Now he's just a good natured, low-maintenance friend who's really easy to talk to – especially since he almost never talks back, and when he does it's usually to tell me through some slightly weird "sign" that what I want to do regardless is alright by him. That really is the best kind of friend, isn't it?

You know, the best thing about him? He doesn't judge me. Ever, for anything. Oh sure, I know that deep down he wishes that I'd be better – more loving, less selfish, and all that, but he's realistic. He knows I'm human and nobody's perfect. And I'm totally sure he's fine with that. Besides, forgiving people is his job. It's what he does. After all, he's love, right? And I like to think of love as "never judging, only forgiving." That's the god I know. And I wouldn't have him any other way.

Okay, we can go in now. And don't worry, we don't have to stay long. Really. He's grateful for any time he can get."

Is there anything in Gilbert's satire that reflects how you think about God? Be honest. Do we sometimes take God for granted as a tottering old man who's just there to help us achieve our own marvelous plans?

What's missing in this popular vision of God? Well, a lot, but most of all, what's missing is a sense of God as almighty. God is eternal, unchangeable, and wise. God holds together the cosmos with the Word of his power. God can move mountains and tosses the stars and his plans for the future are unfolding just as he sees fit.

And so, this morning, I hope we can regain a sense of the "almighty" of Almighty God! Because having heard two promises that reveal the kind of saviour we've got (a bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out) I'm afraid that we might conclude that Jesus is just this gentle old soul who doesn't want to disrupt your plans too much.

But then we come to John 6. And it challenges us a little. Jesus says, "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me." But I thought God was just there to affirm our plans, to do what I needed him to do, to give me

what I need along the way.

And so, while we're off trying to find our true selves, live our best lives, find the way to self-actualization and make our own meaning, there's actually something way bigger going on.

Thank goodness! Because left up to us, and we never seem to find what we're looking for. We're a wrestles bunch. We're always hoping that it's the next thing on our bucket list that is going to finally give us satisfaction. But rarely does it ever come true.

And so, this little section of a much longer passage actually contains three promises. The first we will pass by quite quickly. "Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." In other words, that God shaped whole within all of us, that we try to stuff with all kinds of other things, can really only be satisfied with one thing – an Almighty God who rules and reigns over all that is including our lives.

Treat God as your heavenly butler and you'll never fill it. Treat God as your godly grampa and you'll never be satisfied. But treat God as who he really is - the Almighty One – who has dominion over heaven and earth and who is drawing you – by his mighty hand out of a life of rebellion and sin, and into his great and everlasting glory – and well, now we're really on an adventure of a lifetime!

But it's the second promise of this text that is our focus for today. "All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away."

John Bunyan was another puritan pastor in the 1600's. Bunyan is most famous for the book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which is, besides the Bible, history's best-selling book.

In the first chapter of *Pilgrim's Progress*, we meet the main character, Pilgrim, "clothed with rags, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back.... He was greatly distressed in his mind and burst out, "What shall I do to be saved?"

When Pilgrim asks Evangelist along the way, how to escape, Evangelist says, "Do you see yonder shining light?" "I think I do," says Pilgrim. "Then keep that light in your eye, and go up directly thereto: so shalt thou see the gate; at which when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do."

And so, Pilgrim begins his long journey to that distant gate and when he finally arrives, he knocks, saying: "May I now enter here? Will He within open to sorry me, though I have been an undeserving rebel? Then shall I not fail to sing His lasting praise on high."

Goodwill, the gatekeeper opens the gate, and says, "I am willing with all my heart. We make no objections against any notwithstanding all that they have done before they come hither; they are in no wise cast out."

And here is the first mention of John Bunyan's favorite text, John 6:37. "Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out" in the old King James Version. Or in the New International Version, "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away."

In his autobiography, Bunyan said, "Him that cometh unto me I will no wise cast out! Oh, the comfort I found in that word! 'In no wise cast out!' This Scripture did most sweetly visit my soul."

Have you ever had your soul visited with a word from the Lord? Do you know what it is to have hope in place of despair? Do you ever think, "I should go to a therapist and find out what is wrong with me!" and then learn that you can go to Christ and find out what can be right with you?

Have you ever given up your burden in order to receive His joy? Do you know what it is to have your heart and mind transformed because some word in the Bible "did sweetly visit your soul?"

See, this is the power of God. But as we can see, this power of God is displayed through the most gentle and lowly means.

And it will be profitable for us to unpack this most powerful of verses word by word. Because each word contains a power of its own – each word is packed with deeper meaning.

The line begins, "All those...". Not most. Not a select few. Not a couple who make it to the final round. "All those..." When the Father sets his loving gaze on a wandering person, that person's rescue is certain. Our free will, our carefully made plans, our big ideas about ourselves are no match for this Almighty God.

Next, "...the Father...". Our salvation is not a matter of a gracious Son trying to calm down an angry and disappointed Father. This was the Father's idea from the beginning. The Father himself has sent the Son to get us. The "Hound of Heaven" is on a mission to chase us down, to pay our price, to ensure we are never lost again.

"...Gives me...". Not haggles over. Not begrudgingly hands over. It is the Father's delight to "give" us over to the care of his Son. We are God's gift to his Son. We are his deepest desire – and Jesus is only too happy to please the Father by enjoying his most precious gift.

"...will come..." God will not be defeated. Our wandering ways and our drifting hearts are not a problem for the Jesus. Sure, at times he will let us wander off – stretch our legs, learn our lessons in the school of hard knocks. But the Good Shepherd is not losing sight of us even for a moment.

"And whoever comes...". Yet, we are not robots. While the Father is clearly Almighty and sovereign over our all, we are not being dragged kicking and screaming against our will.

God is patient, and he will wait for us to choose. What a great mystery! Because God's grace is so powerful that it has the capacity to reach down and turn our desires in a new direction. And when we perceive him, Christ becomes so beautiful to us, we desire to come to Him even as our hearts desire is to flee from the wrath of God.

"...Comes to me...". We do not come to a set of doctrines. We do not come to a set of spiritual practices. We do not come to a church building. We do not even come to the gospel. All these are tools we can use to centre our focus on Christ – or they can become idols that keep us at arm's length, but ultimately it is Christ himself to whom we come.

But its right about now that we start to put up our defenses, isn't it. In his book called *Gentle and Lowly*, pastor Dane Ortlund says, "Fallen, anxious people are limitless in their capacity to perceive reasons for Jesus to cast them out. We are factories of fresh resistances to Christ's love. Even when we run out of tangible reasons to be cast out, such as specific sins or failures, we tend to retain a vague sense, that given enough time, Jesus will finally grow tired of us and hold us at arm's length."

Bunyan saw this too. And yet, Bunyan saw how Jesus' words, "I will never drive away" drains all of our objects of their power. He lists a few of them:

"But I am a great sinner," say you. "I will never drive away," Christ says.

"But I am an old sinner," say you. "I will never drive away," Christ says.

"But I am a hard-hearted sinner," say you. "I will never drive away," Christ says.

"But I'm a backsliding sinner," say you. "I will never drive away," Christ says.

"But I have served Satan all my days," say you. "I will never drive away, Christ says."

"But I have sinned against light," say you. "I will never drive away, Christ says"

"But I have sinned against mercy," say you. "I will never drive away," Christ says.

"But I have no good thing to bring with me," you say, "I will never drive away," Christ says.

Jesus' statement in John 6:37 is a gift from our gentle and lowly Lord, who intends to calm our frantic objections and to open our hearts to his saving power over all of them.