

explanation can we give? None. But we come none the less, because we are assured that Christ's priestly role is to deal gently with his children. That's what it says in the next chapter from Hebrews. "He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward since he himself is subject to weakness" (Hebrews 5:2).

And this is the key. Fail to come to Jesus and what happens? Listen to what the great 19th century preacher Martyn Lloyd Jones once said:

Be careful how you treat God, my friends. You may say to yourself, "I can sin against God and then, of course, I can repent and go back and find God whenever I want him." You try it. And you will sometimes find that not only can you not find God but that you do not even want to. You will be aware of a terrible hardness in your heart."

And this is why we must flee to our gentle Saviour. Why is he so gentle? Because he can empathize. But we might say, "Oh sure, gentle with those who have done things that are not too bad. Wander off the school property and he will be gentle but anything more than that, what can we expect?"

But see, that's not how it works. Jesus deals gently with all his children who come to him, not by virtue of the severity of their sin, but by the virtue of who Jesus is. Gentle and lowly is who he is. He is simply being himself.

So, what elicits tenderness from Jesus is not the category of sin we've committed, but it's whether the sinner comes to him. Whatever the offense, he deals gently if we come. But fail to come and we can expect nothing but hardened hearts and fierce judgement. It has to be that way – because "the wages of sin is death." But come to him, let his death be your death, put on Christ and lion-like judgement becomes lamb-like tenderness.

Jesus is God made weak for our sake. And so, when we make ourselves weak and kneel before him, Christ goes deeper into

solidarity with us. As we go down he goes down. And in our lowness together we enter ever deeper into Christ's very heart, not away from it.

It's counter intuitive, I know, but that's why Christ's suffering is so important. It's why Good Friday must always be in our minds as we face our own challenges – because it is there that Jesus meets us where we are.

So, we look to Christ. He deals gently with us. It's the only way he knows how to be toward his siblings. He is the high priest to end all high priests. As long as you fix your attention on your sin you will fail to see how you can deal with it – it will be an unsolvable problem and an endless source of guilt and shame.

But as long as you look at your high priest, you will see nothing by grace. Look inside yourself and you will live in fear of harshness from heaven. But look out to Christ, and we can see only a gentle and lowly saviour.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

## ***"Gentle and Lowly: Come to the Throne of Grace"***

*April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: Hebrews 4:14-16*

*By Rev. Mike Putnam*

**W**hen I was about eight years old, I did some time in the principal's office. Once. It was traumatic.

Only-children like me are not usually rule breakers. But this one time, a friend of mine and I were hanging around the far end of the playground near the gate to the outside world. We could see his house. It was just a little way down the road.

"Let's run to my house and back," he said. "Sure," I said. And why not? What's the harm? I know, I know, we weren't supposed to go off of school property, but it was just a little way down the road and in a couple hours we'd both be walking home down that very road – what's the difference.

So, we did. We ran to his house and back. But when we back to the gate we had company. Mrs. White was waiting for us. She took both of us by the scruff of the neck and hauled us inside to the principal's office.

We did our time. We took our punishment. For the rest of the week, we'd be spending our recesses with Mrs. Dunford in the office. No more freedom – no more great escapes. My life of crime was behind me. I was a changed man.

But that night I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned. My pillow was wet from tears. The guilty feelings were too much. I knew I did wrong but now I didn't know what to do about it.

I crept downstairs where my mom was watching TV. I told her everything. I think she was disappointed that her perfect little baby had done wrong, for the first time ever, but she went easy on me. I looked up at her through my tears and said, "Please, don't tell Dad."

Dad probably wouldn't understand. He probably never did anything like this in his

day. He probably didn't face the kind of temptation I did. The disappointment would be too much to bear. "Please, just don't tell Dad."

Ever been there? You've done something wrong – you said something unkind; you've made the wrong decision, you've committed sin – but now you're not sure what to do about it? You toss and turn, replay it over and over in your mind, you feel shame and guilt?

I mean sure, you can do your time, you can say you're sorry, but it doesn't make it right, does it? Are you a different sort of person now because of your crime? Are you now going to be known as a bad person, a rule breaker, or a sinner?

Well, this morning Hebrews wants us to know that what we should do in these circumstances is flee to Christ. We should go to him without reservation or fear. When we're lost, or broken, or suffering from the sins in our lives we should run straight to him.

Which sounds too simple. But God has made it just that simple. Because your relationship with God isn't based on how good you have been, what you've accomplished or how nice you are. You don't have to have all the answers. You don't need to bring anything to your relationship with Christ – he provides all.

And so, God has lovingly given us a solution to our broken dreams and wayward ways unlike any other. There is no reason to hold back. Why remain guarded and aloof when God offers his massive love in the most obviously wonderful person who ever walked the face of the earth? Why not trust him? Because if you do, he will draw you in, and he will do so forever. This is the promise of the gospel.

In a play called *Breath*, written in

1969 by Samuel Becket, who belonged to the “theater of the absurd” movement that was a thing at the time, we see what happens without the hope of a saviour.

The whole play lasts about thirty-five seconds. The curtain parts revealing a pile of garbage on stage. There are no actors. The only sound is a human cry as the lights come up, which is followed by silence, which is followed by a whimper as the lights go out. End of play, end of life, end of story. That is a picture of perishing – a lifetime that leaves behind a trail of junk – old clothes, old computers, carbon emissions, and lost opportunities, then a funeral.

In this version of reality life results in nothing but garbage. And all that is left is the white-hot-judgment of God in eternity. All that is left is to account for it all.

But the Bible shines a light into the darkness of that nihilistic version of life. The Bible says “that’s actually not all folks!” The Bible says, despite it all, put your trust in Jesus, come to Him, trust Him to put things right.

Jonathan Edwards, the great 18th century preacher who served God during a great time of revival helps us to become a little more decisive about Jesus. He wrote:

What is there that you could desire in a Savior that is not in Christ? What is there that is great or good, what is there that is venerable or winning, what is there that is adorable or endearing, or what can you think of that would be encouraging which is not to be found in the person of Christ? Would you have your Savior be great and honorable, because you are unwilling to be beholden to a low person? And is not Christ honorable enough to be worthy that you should be dependent on him? Is he not a person high enough to be appointed to be a Savior of high degree but would you have him to be made also of low degree, that he might experience afflictions and trials, that he might learn by the things that he has suffered to pity those who suffer and are tempted? And has not Christ

been made low enough for you, and has he not suffered enough? What is there lacking, or what would you add if you could, to make Christ more fit to be your Saviour?

There is a lot of love in this world. There is. But most of it is moderate love. But in Christ we find nothing moderate. We find nothing mildly adequate. We find a kind of love so abundant, so unrelenting, so overwhelming that we can never fear that it will be in short supply, or not be enough to fill our need.

And so today, in the last week of this sermon series we are considering the promise that Jesus can empathize with us. How can that be? How can our judge relate to the problems we face?

Well, let’s listen to what the text has to say as we consider three questions; Who do we have in Christ? What does it mean? And finally, what should we do?

Who do we have? First, who do we have in Christ? The text says, “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.”

The letter to the Hebrews is written to a Christian community that is struggling with their faith in Jesus. They’re facing persecution. It’s too much. They’re wondering if life wouldn’t be easier if they just gave up on the Jesus part.

They live in a time of religious pluralism. There are temples and shrines to gods of all sorts on every street corner. Priests are a dime a dozen. Each promising that their access to their gods will give you what you want most.

But these Jesus people are too much. Is their religion even a proper religion? I mean, they have no temples, no shrines, no rituals, no priests! They valorize suffering and live simple and non-materialistic lives. And they keep growing! It’s suspicious. It’s not how religion is supposed to work.

In our time, Christians don’t face persecution like they did – but we may still be tempted to wonder if there might be a better solution to our problems than Jesus. And that’s why it’s essential that we be able to answer the question, “Who do we have?” in Jesus.

The answer comes to us in the words “who has passed through the heavens” – Not a high priest who passes through a curtain into a room symbolizing heaven to perform a ritual that symbolizes forgiveness. Jesus is actually in heaven – Jesus is in God’s control room and he’s gone there having actually sacrificed himself paying the price for the sins of the world.

So, who do we have? Not a set of rituals or ideas. Not a religious professional. We have a person. And Jesus is the only one who knows the way to God. How does he know? Because he’s already made the trip.

We don’t have priests in our version of faith because we have one better. We have the great high priest, who sits at the right hand of the Father in the heavenly realms, and who intercedes for us.

What does it mean?

But what does that mean? What difference does Jesus’ location make for you and me in our real lives? Hebrews says, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”

The difference is that Jesus can relate. The sinless son of God knows what you are facing. When you’re going through something what do you want? You want someone who can say, “I know what you’re going through.”

Jesus knows what it’s like to be human. Jesus faced temptation by Satan. Satan offered Jesus bread to satiate his desire, he offered Jesus an opportunity for recognition, he offered Jesus power. And these are our temptations too – manifest in a million subtle forms on a daily basis. But unlike us, Jesus was

able to overcome each of them in a way that is beyond us.

For us, tempted by just the right thing, in just the right way, at just the right time and we will fall. We sometimes judge others who succumb to things we don’t struggle with, but we get pretty defensive when we succumb to our own temptations. Because we have no strength; we have no defences against those things. Satan finds our weaknesses and on our worst days we don’t have the strength to resist. So, we pray, “Lead us not into temptation,” because frankly we know we’re not up to the test.

And when we do fail or fall what do we want most? We want someone who can say, “I’ve been there.” We want to find someone who knows what it’s like and who can give us advice about what to do next. We want someone who can help us make it all better.

But friends with common experiences can only do so much. There is no friend who can take away the guilt or shame.

But as Christians we can come back to a day when Jesus was so overcome by his temptation that he was sweating blood and praying “If it is possible take this cup from me.” The answer was no. Jesus’ follow-up statement was “Nevertheless, thy will be done.”

What does this mean? It means he gets you. He knows what it’s like to inhabit your weakness. He knows what it’s like to be tempted. But he also knows what’s next because he has opened up a way forward for each of us. He takes our shame and guilt to his cross and he replaces it with his righteousness.

What should we do?

So, what’s next? What should we do? The scripture says, “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Why should we approach God’s throne? What do we have to offer? What